AUG. 25¢

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

DUST across the RANGE

by MAX BRAND

LOOT of the LAZY A

by W. C. TUTTLE

BORDER BREED

by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

IS IT WRONG FOR A WHITE WOMAN TO GO NATIVE?

No woman has ever been so daring—or so damned!

A group of American and European exiles are stranded south of the border. Intrigue fills the air, passions that simmered in their hearts for years reach the boiling point, and adventure stands behind every shoulder. You'll do more than read this book, you'll *live* every exciting moment of...ADIOS, O'SHAUGHNESSY!

ORIGINAL-EDITION PRICE from $2.00 to $3.00

POPULAR LIBRARY

REPRINT PRICE **25¢**

ORIGINALLY SOLD FOR $3.00

ANY BEST-SELLING REPRINT ON THIS PAGE ONLY 25¢

RAMROD by Luke Short

Love and hate ride the Western range! A two-fisted cowboy has the battle of his life when he tries to defend his rights as a human being. Don't miss the surprise ending!

SHADOW OF A HERO by Allan Chase

An honest reporter faces death as he tries to expose an underworld hero whose passion is crime, whose friends are corrupt politicians!

SEASON FOR PASSION by Lee Manning

Was it love or lust that threw him into the arms of a native girl? The scene is war-time Korea where a crooked plot lures Alan Kirby into danger!

LIMITED SUPPLY...ORDER NOW!

POPULAR LIBRARY, INC., DEPT. TFG-8
10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y.

Please send me the Popular Library Books I have checked. I enclose 25¢ (in coin or in U. S. stamps of small denominations) per copy. (We pay postage for orders of 4 books or more.) If ordering less than 4 books, please enclose 5¢ per book extra for postage.

- ☐ ADIOS, O'SHAUGHNESSY by Robert Tallman
- ☐ SHADOW OF A HERO by Allan Chase
- ☐ SEASON FOR PASSION by Lee Manning
- ☐ RAMROD by Luke Short

You'll want these exciting books, too (not shown):

- ☐ HOODLUM by Charley Robertson
- ☐ END OF TRACK by Ward Weaver
- ☐ CAMPUS TOWN by Hart Stilwell
- ☐ WHILE MURDER WAITS by John Esteven
- ☐ THE MAGNIFICENT COURTESAN by Lozania Prole
- ☐ BULLETS AT CLEARWATER by Edison Marshall

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY & ZONE_____ STATE_____

Cut out Coupon MAIL TODAY

Can you profit by their mistakes?

"What's your biggest mistake?" That's the question asked of American men and women in a national poll. Almost one out of every three who answered said, *"Not getting enough education."*

You needn't make that mistake. Not when it's so easy to study with I. C. S. at home in your spare time.

The next biggest mistake, said the men, was *"Wrong choice of career."*

Study with I. C. S. and you have over 400 courses to choose from. Part of our job here at I. C. S. is making sure that you pick the course that's right for you!

Number Three Mistake? *"Failed to seize opportunities."*

Be sure to seize your opportunities. Be sure to fill out and mail the coupon below—*today!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 3967-V, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Prac. FM and Television
- ☐ Prac. Telephony ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combus. Engrg. ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Engr. ☐ Steam Engineer

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service In World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

THREE WESTERN CLASSIC NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 9, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION AUGUST, 1951

DUST ACROSS THE RANGE

When Harry Mortimer came West to work for the conservation of the soil, and became the agricultural expert at the Tumbling H Ranch, he didn't expect to be impeded by girl trouble in the person of Lou Miller, the Cross M manager

MAX BRAND 9

BORDER BREED

Cal Benteen was a cowboy—but he was also a wanted man with a price on his head—and he had to fight to find his own salvation when he was thrust into the roaring crucible of range war and faced the guns of some proddy outlaws!

LESLIE ERNENWEIN 62

LOOT OF THE LAZY A

When cowboy Cultus Collins became the champion of a lady in distress his act of gallantry suddenly plunged him into the biggest fight of his life and put him right in the middle of a baffling and dangerous mystery of the rangeland

W. C. TUTTLE 92

THE TRAIL BOSS (A Department)	**John A. Thompson**	**6**
THE STAGE COACH	**A New Feature**	**59**
THE OUTLAW (Verse)	**Carl L. Stader**	**60**
QUIET AFTERNOON IN CACTUS CREEK	**Sam Brant**	**140**

"Dust Across the Range," Copyright, 1937, 1938, by Frederick Faust. "Border Breed," Copyright, 1946, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in May, 1946, Thrilling Western. "Loot of the Lazy A," Copyright, 1926, by Doubleday, Page & Company

TRIPLE WESTERN. Published every other month and copyright, 1951, by BEST PUBLICATIONS, Inc., 1125 East Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

A GOOD NEIGHBOR OF YOURS

HAS SIGNED THIS STATEMENT

Yes, Lee Dealers Coast-to-Coast say,
"Thank you, friends and neighbors, for your patronage. Today and always you can rely on the high quality of our merchandise and on our policy of sincere, helpful, service."

Your friendly Lee Dealer

There's a friendly Lee Dealer near you who has signed the statement above. Make his store your headquarters for all types of high quality merchandise.

There's a LEE for Every Job

Overalls • Jackets
Matched Shirts and Pants
Dungarees • Riders (Cowboy Pants for men, women and boys) • Rider Jackets
Union-Alls.

Lee
Highest Quality
WORK CLOTHES

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.

Kansas City, Mo. Minneapolis, Minn. Trenton, N. J.
San Francisco, Calif. South Bend, Ind.

COPYRIGHT, 1951
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURER OF UNION-MADE WORK CLOTHES

THE MYSTERY SHIP

By John A. Thompson

IT WAS Burro McCabe who got me interested in the ghost ship that is supposed to lie in the lonely wastes of southern California's Colorado Desert. One of the last of the old-time desert rats, Burro knew every nook and cranny of the Chocolate Mountains in that country, and every cranny and nook on down across the desert to the Cocopahs in Mexico.

We got to talking about mirages one night. A mirage, of course, is something the desert traveler thinks he sees but doesn't. Generally it is a sky-blue lake glittering on the desert floor. Sometimes it is the outline of a city. And always it is distant. The more you try to move in on it, the further away it grows until suddenly it vanishes altogether.

"Ever see a ship mirage?" I asked Burro. "An old Spanish galleon, maybe?"

Burro squinted his eyes shrewdly. "You wouldn't be meaning that gold-laden ghost hull now, would you? Nope, I've never seen it. But I tell you it ain't a mirage. Fact is, I used to know an old Papago Indian who claimed some of his people had seen the hulk. Said it was word-of-mouth history handed down in his tribe for generations."

Burro beat me to my next question.

"Where? Mister, if I knew I'd be lighting out for that place tonight. My own guess is it's probably in Mexico above the head of the Gulf of Californy. Or maybe miles back of the bank on the west side of the Colorado River.

"The waters of the Gulf used to push a lot deeper into the desert than they do now. Nothing far-fetched about one of them Spanish ships sailing into the mouth of the Gulf or even up the river. They did right along."

I agreed with Burro.

Hernando de Alarçon, Spanish navigator of the Colorado River, sailed up the Gulf of California and on into the Colorado past the high bluff that now marks the site of Yuma, Ariz., back in 1540.

Other Spanish ships plied the Gulf and tried the Colorado throughout the days of the Spanish conquest. As the land thereabouts became at least partially settled, Yuma grew into a seaport, for all its desert setting. By the time the U.S. acquired the Southwest by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848, Yuma was the Southwest's gateway to the sea.

A United States port of entry, it harbored ships laden with supplies for the rich mining country inland, and sent them out to sea filled to the gunwales with gold and with rich copper ore destined for the smelters of Swansea, Wales.

Desert country or not, both gold and ships were no mirages around Yuma in those days, Burro and I both knew.

"Well," said Burro, "suppose this ship got caught in a bad storm or a tidal wave and flung up on the beach high and dry? Maybe she even grounded on a bar. That's been done."

Burro was still right as Lincoln's face on a five-dollar bill.

"Except it's the same sand, the desert changes a lot in a hundred years. So the desert fills up. The ship is further from water than ever. The danged eternal desert wind keeps blowing sand over the wreck. Pretty soon the hull's buried as complete as if the

ship had gone down in deep water. No sign of her left."

"All right," I said. "But what about your Indian friend who said his people had seen the thing—ghost ship or real?"

I thought I had the old desert rat on that one. But he gave me a look that would wither a Joshua tree cactus.

"Thought I just told you the desert keeps changing. That's why maybe some have actually seen the ship and others ain't. One windstorm might blow the rotted prow clear and leave it sticking out like a bird dog's tail. And maybe the very next storm would cover it up."

Whether you believe the story or not is beside the point. Burro McCabe did. And the tantalizing part of it is that it *could* be true.

The legend of this lost ship, its hull hiding bars of Spanish gold, crops up in accounts of travels across the desert.

One wreck at least is known to be buried in the sand, probably 20 miles from the present course of the Colorado River. It is the ship *Explorer* in which, in 1857, Lieut. J. C. Ives explored the Colorado for the War Dept. up to and above the present site of Boulder Dam.

In her later years, when the Army was through with her, the *Explorer* was used as a Colorado River freighter plying out of Yuma. After much service she was finally wrecked and carried downstream in one of the periodic floods that characterized the river in those days. In a later flood the river jumped its old channel and changed its entire lower course. (That was before Boulder Dam brought its often turbulent waters under man-made control.) And it left the gallant little *Explorer* deep in the arid desert even out of sight of the present river.

Centuries earlier, the same thing could have happened to a stately Spanish galleon. Or perhaps it was a pirate ship. Or a Gulf of California pearler.

Time could have obliterated all trace of the ship. Yet its history would almost surely have been incorporated in the legends of the local Indians.

The Indians believe it. Burro McCabe knew it for a fact. As for me, of course I don't really take any stock in the story. But I had one wingding of a swell time looking for it with Burro—until my grubstake ran out.

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.

SUPERIOR MATCH CO.

Dept. R-851, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, *write* Box 1067, San Jose, Calif.

High School Course at Home **Many Finish in 2 Years**

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. HC-58, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Be a DETECTIVE

A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!

Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.

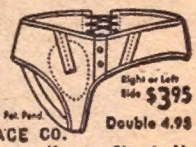
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL
1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 198 Washington 18, D. C.

RUPTURE-EASER

FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

A strong, form fitting, washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after-operation support. Give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen. Specify right or left side or double. We pay postage except on COD's PIPER BRACE CO.



811 Wyandotte Dept. TF-81 Kansas City 6, Mo.

QUIT TOBACCO!

Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF. Ft. Worth 3, Texas

BE A *Nurse*

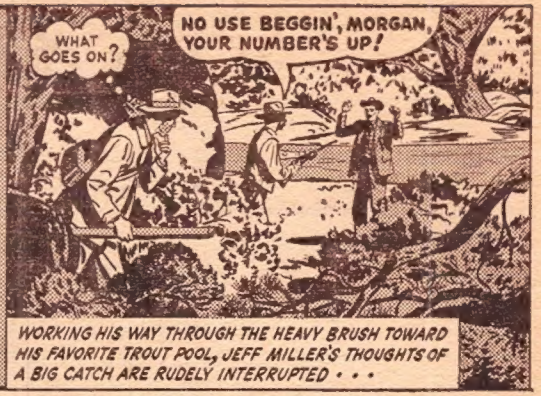
MAKE $50-$60 A WEEK

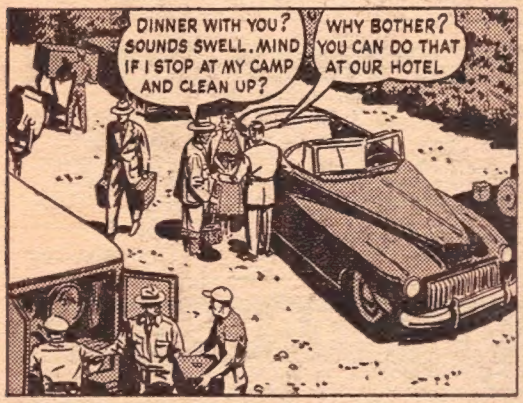
Practical nurses are needed in every community...doctors rely on them... patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 52nd yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women, 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 425, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet, and 16 sample lesson pages.

Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

JEFF LOST INTEREST IN FISHING WHEN...





A Novel by **MAX BRAND**

When Harry Mortimer came West to work for the conservation of the soil, he didn't expect to be impeded by girl trouble!

I

OFF the high, level plateau of the range, cattle trails dip like crooked runlets of white water into

Copyright, 1937, 1938, by Frederick Faust

DUST ACROSS THE RANGE

the valley of the Chappany. Louise Miller, bound for home after an exhilarating ride over the range, came off the level like a ski jumper from the take-off mound. She rode like an Indian. She had the brown skin and the eye-flash of an Indian, too, though there was no more redman in her than there was mustang in her thoroughbred.

She had returned to the ranch from a visit in the East to celebrate her twenty-first birthday and take over the management of the place since her father planned to embark on a two-year drifting voyage through the Old World. She had brought him in her pocket, so to speak, the problem of two men between whom she was to select a husband, one of whom had actually accompanied her to the ranch, and had ridden out alone today to make her choice. She had made her decision, too, and she was homeward bound in a hurry to tell big Frederick Wilson before she changed her mind again, that he was man enough to suit her. Perhaps he had been wise in coming home with her, not letting her out of his sight.

LOU MILLER

Girl Manager of John Miller's Cross M Ranch

That was why she took the second downward bend of the trail so fast that her chestnut mount, Hampton, skidded. Then before her eyes flashed danger—a barbed-wire fence as bright as a sword. She sat Hampton down on his hocks and skidded him to a halt a yard or so from the wire.

A hundred yards away nine men were building more fence, stretching and nailing wire, or tamping posts in place, or screwing augers into the hard ground. Eight of them were CCC men, she knew, donated by the Government to help make the Hancock Tumbling H Ranch here an example of soil-conservation methods. The ninth man, gaunt from labor, was undoubtedly the fellow to blame for these insane fences which cut the old trail like a pair of knives. He was working with a thirty-pound crowbar, breaking the hardpan.

That man was Harry Mortimer, who for two years had been trying to make the Tumbling H pay. He had one-third share in the ranch, and had come out of the East with a brain crammed full of college-bred agricultural theories and an odd desire to teach the ranchers new ways on the old range.

His family had spent generations wearing down the soil of a New England farm until the bones of the earth showed through. Mortimer's father had left the farm, had gone into business that prospered, but had left in his son the old yearning to return to the soil. That was why Harvey had majored in agriculture in college, but when he had looked for a work sphere after graduation, rocky little New England farms had seemed too small a field. So he had come West, since he had inherited a share in the Tumbling H Ranch.

WHATEVER bookish idiocy had suggested fences to him, Louise wanted to get to him fast and tell him what she thought of them. So she spurred Hampton around the lower end of the fence. But here the ground was

chopped into little gullies and gravel ridges, which Hampton took like a small boat in a choppy sea. He slipped on loose soil—and the next instant Louise Miller was sailing toward the far horizon.

Her only thought as she landed was to damn everything, including her own foolish haste and Harry Mortimer. Then she was sitting up, with the landscape getting back from a dizzy whirl.

Sweating men lifted her to her feet, but Harry Mortimer was not among them. He had let this chip fall where it might while he trotted off in pursuit of Hampton.

Vaguely she heard the men speaking sympathetically, felt their hands brushing her off carefully, but she was furiously wishing that Hampton would kick holes through Mortimer. Instead, the thoroughbred stood near the fence like a lamb and allowed himself to be caught. Harry Mortimer brought him back and handed the girl her reins.

"I thought for a minute that you might have a long walk home," he said.

She looked him over not answering, and pretended to be catching her breath. He worked stripped to the waist, with an old straw sombrero on his head. The sun had bronzed him; sweat had polished the bronze. He had the light stance of a sprinter, but his shoulders and arms were corded with muscles of steel. The strain of labor and many responsibilities seamed his face, but he had the look of a man who knew how to endure, and strike hard.

"Sorry you ran out of places where fences are needed," she was able to say at last. "This is just some practice work for you and your men, I suppose? Or did you think it would be fun to block the trail and cut up the livestock on your barbed wire?"

He picked up the thirty-pound crowbar and tossed it lightly from hand to hand.

"While you're thinking up an answer," said Louise, "I'd suggest that there's lots of fence to put up on my

HARRY MORTIMER

Agricultural Expert at the Tumbling H Ranch

place, where it will do good. Where does the fun come in, Harry? Digging the holes or seeing the pretty wire flash in the sun?"

The men laughed. She had understood that they lived almost in awe of their boss, but now they only laughed with deep enjoyment.

"Talk up to her, Chief," one of them called. "Don't lay down in the first round."

"You have to give a lady the first hold, boys," said Mortimer, grinning. Then he asked Louise, "Any sore places from that fall, or are you just feeling sour?"

"Not at all," she said haughtily. "I'm simply asking a few questions."

"Want me to answer Lou Miller?" he asked. "Or am I talking to the manager of John Miller's Cross M Ranch?"

"I'm going to manage it, all right." She nodded grimly.

"D'you know enough to?" he demanded, and turned. "You fellows get back to that fence-line, will you?"

"Every Miller ever was born knows enough to run a cattle ranch," Louise answered, as they departed.

"Then why don't you know why I'm building these fences?" said Mortimer.

"I do know. It's for exercise."

He jabbed the crowbar into the ground and leaned on it, grinning.

"How long has the trail run over this ground?" he asked.

"Two or three years," she said.

"Where was it before?"

"Over there where those gullies are opening up," she said.

"Was there a trail before that one?"

"Yes. It traveled along that big arroyo."

"What made the gullies, and what started the big arroyo washing?" he asked her.

"Why, the rain, I suppose," said Louise. "What else?"

"It was the trail," said Mortimer. "It wore down through the grass and the topsoil till it was a trench, and heavy rains washed the trench deeper. I'm building these fences to make the cattle wear new trails."

"The point is that the old range and the old range ways aren't good enough for you, Harry," she retorted angrily, and waved a hand across the Chappany valley to her own ranchhouse home, the green trees around it, and to the miles of level ground beyond. "The other generations didn't know anything. Is that it?"

HE CONSIDERED her as though he doubted the value of making an answer. Then he pointed, also.

"See that thousand acres of hay your father planted?" he asked. "And, spilling into the valley below it, see the silt that's flowed onto the low ground? That silt spoils fifty acres of good river-bottom that's fit for the plow. Know how it comes to be there?"

"Wash from a heavy rain, I suppose," she answered gloomily.

"Yes. Your father ripped up a thousand acres of virgin rangeland. His plow cut through the roots of the grass of the topsoil that's been accumulating for a million years. The rain washed the loose ground away. The first dry season and hard wind that comes along, that thousand acres will blow away like feathers. And the earth will have a million years of work to do all over again."

"Father had to have extra hay," the girl defended. "He had to plant."

"Look down the Chappany along the Hancock range," said Mortimer.

"It looks like a crazy quilt," she said wryly.

"Because it's strip-plowed to leave holding grass, and contour-plowed in other places to keep the soil from washing. Those brush tangles in the gullies are dams that will keep the gullies from deepening. Every slope of more than twenty per cent is planted to trees; every slope of more than twelve goes to permanent grass. In another year or so I'll have every acre buttoned down to the ground with grass or trees, so that it *can't* blow."

"I understand," she said. "You've been reading newspaper stories about dust storms. Do you happen to know that there's never been a dust storm on this range?"

"There *will* be some day," he answered. "Look at the mountains. That blowing mist isn't clouds. It's dust. Ten thousand acres going to hell this minute!"

Louise stared toward the blue of the mountains, saw a smudging darkness in the air.

"That's Curtis Valley blowing up in smoke," Mortimer said. "A dry season and a strong wind—and the dry season's with us all right. The Chappany is already dry. Only May, and the range is bone-dry."

She glanced down the slope at the lakes in the bottom of the valley. There were five of them, extended by old dams. Three were on Miller land; two belonged to the Hancock place. Usually the little Chappany River was dry only in August, and during that month cattle came to those lakes from miles off the dry range.

This year though, not only had the

little river ceased flowing, but waterholes also were drying up and cattle had already commenced to head to the valley for water. Scores of them even now stood shoulder deep in the lakes.

"A dry season, and a hard wind," Mortimer repeated. "That thousand acres your father plowed is a gun pointed at the head of the whole country. If that starts blowing, the topsoil all over the range is apt to peel off like skin. The whole range—beautiful damned miles of it—will go up in smoke. And my land lies right under the gun!"

II

LOUISE MILLER'S brain rocked as she listened to Harry Mortimer, and she felt conviction strike her as with hands. If she could not argue, at least she could hate. Her father hated this man, and she would have felt disloyal if she also did not hate him.

"So that was why you tried to stab Father in the back?" She shrugged.

"I complained to the Government and the soil-conservation authorities," he said. "I'd tried a thousand times to talk sense to John Miller. And they'd have *made* him toe the line, if he hadn't known the right political wires to pull."

She laughed unpleasantly. "Wire-pulling?" she said. "That's better than rope-pulling, Harry!"

"You mean your father would like to see me lynched?" he asked. "I suppose he would. He hates me. But if I thought I could change his mind, I'd crawl on my hands and knees to him, sit up and beg like a dog, because he's the king of the range and unless he wakes up, some night the whole range will blow away."

She swung suddenly into saddle.

This strange, savage humility of his so troubled her that it was hard to find the chord of hatred on which she had been strumming.

"Why not try him again, Harry?" was the only answer she found to say. "This evening we're giving a barbecue for my birthday, and perhaps he'd be glad to see you. I'm sure the boys would be glad. And so would I!"

She put some of her anger into her spurs, and sent Hampton scurrying down the slope.

At noon, Mortimer loaded his men into the wagon and drove back to the Tumbling H ranchhouse. He had been a fool, he told himself, to talk to Louise Miller so frankly. He couldn't force a young wildcat like Lou to see the truth. Maybe he should have tried flattery. He couldn't expect her to accept his beliefs as did the men in the wagon behind him.

He began thinking of those boys. Every one had been with him at least a year and a half. Each was like another right hand to Mortimer. They had come to him a surly, unwilling bunch he had begged or borrowed from the CCC camp at Poplar Springs, to help him make the Hancock ranch an example in soil conservation. The entire eight had remained like members of a family. He gave them his confidence and they gave him their ungrudging affection. He knew the worst as well as the best that was in them, and they understood him, especially his ultimate purpose to reform present ranching methods and widen the security which old-fashioned methods constantly diminished.

He considered each, in turn. "Baldy" Inman was the most docile of them all, but when he went on a binge once a month, Mortimer sat with him night after night and brought him home again to sobriety. "Bud" McGee loved battle, and Mortimer had dragged him out of saloon brawls at the risk of both their necks. George Masters loved poker and knew all too well how to deal. "Chip" Ellis and "Dink" Waller were always about to head out, and talked of far countries till the rest of the boys were on edge. "Lefty" Parkman had been in the ring and on Sundays he helped in teaching the boys to box. He had beaten Mortimer, Sunday after Sunday, until sheer pain taught Mortimer a deadly left of his own. "Pudge" Major supplied music and noisy jokes.

Jan Erickson, the giant of the crew, had once broken away and got as far as Denver, where Mortimer overtook him and brought him home. Mortimer got back with an eye which changed from black to purple to green, and Erickson's face was swollen for a month, but they never referred to what happened in Denver, and were loyal comrades.

Thinking of his crew, the determination to take a big chance came to Mortimer. It was full blown when he stopped the wagon in front of the big shed which had been turned into a barracks for the CCC workers.

"Shorty," the cook, was banging on a tin pan and yelling to them to come and get it. But Mortimer, instead of going in with the boys, went on to the ranchhouse.

As usual, he found Charlie Hancock stretched on the couch in the big living room with limes, sugar, Jamaica rum, and hot-water jug conveniently on the table beside him. Because of the heat of the day he was in trunks and slippers only, and he had a volume of Boswell's "Johnson" propped on his fat paunch. His glasses, his prematurely old face and his short gray mustache gave him the air of a country gentleman reposing in a Turkish bath.

Both Monte and Mortimer slewed from the saddle

This posture, however, had recently become more than a posture, for since Mortimer had appeared and was willing to take charge of the ranch, Charles Hancock had sunk into the character

naturally. A fine education had given edge to one of the clearest minds Mortimer had ever encountered—but it was also the most vicious brain he knew.

The direction of the ranch work had been left to Mortimer, but there still remained on the place half a dozen cowpunchers whom Hancock had picked up, not so much because they knew cows as because they shot straight and were devoted to him. Aside from rum and books, guns were the main preoccupation of Charles Hancock. When he left his rum bottle, it was generally to go hunting with some of his hired hands. They did not mix with the CCC men.

"Wang!" called Hancock. "Bring another glass for Mr. Mortimer, and some more hot water."

A Chinese appeared in the kitchen doorway, bowed, and trotted off.

"I'm not drinking," said Mortimer, and began to pace the room, staring out a window that looked up the Chappany valley, or looking vacantly at the photograph of old Jim Hancock, who had retired from the ranch to live in Poplar Springs. On fifty dollars a month he kept himself happy with frijoles and whisky and let the world wag on its way.

The income from the ranch was split three ways—one to old Jim, one to Charles, one to Mortimer. But Charlie managed to use most of his father's portion besides his own.

"Ah, I see," he said now to Mortimer. "You're a slave to your conscience that forces you to make the world a better place to live in. You care for nothing, Harry, but a big range, with nothing but green on it. What is there you wouldn't

do for it?"

"I've been wondering," said Mortimer, vaguely.

"Grass for cows!" Hancock said, laughing. "You'd die to give it to 'em."

"It's a great deal more, Charlie," answered Mortimer, shaking his head. "It's the idea of a living country instead of a dying one. Tell me, Charlie—what would happen if I showed my face at the Miller barbecue this evening?"

Hancock took a deep swallow of his rum punch.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing—at first."

"And then?" asked Mortimer.

"There would be a dash of surprise," said Hancock, smiling as he enlarged his thought. "Old John Miller would have apoplexy, and when the drink began to soak into the cowpunchers' systems and got into their brains, I don't know just how it would happen. Someone would stumble against you, or trip over your foot, or take a word or the way you lifted an eyebrow for an insult, and presently you'd be stuck full of knives and drilled full of bullet-holes!"

"You think Miller wants me dead as badly as that?" asked Mortimer.

"Think? I know! You bring down a damned Commission on him. It finds that the great John Miller has been overstocking, destroying the grass with too many hoofs. The Commission is about to put a supervisor in charge of the Miller ranch and cause all the Millers to rise in their graves. Only by getting a Governor and a couple of Senators out of bed in the middle of the night is he able to stop it. And he owes it all to you. Wants you dead? Why, John Miller's father would have gone gunning for you himself, and John Miller's grandfather would have sent half a dozen of his Mexican *vaqueros* to cut your throat. These Millers have been kings, Harry, and don't forget it."

"Well," Mortimer said absently, "the girl will be running the place in a few days. But she's as hard as her father."

"Soften her then," said Hancock.

"She challenged me to come to the barbecue," said Mortimer. "If I go, will that soften her?"

"Of course," answered Hancock. "And the guns will soften *you*, later on. Are you going to be fool enough to go?"

"If I win her over to my beliefs," said Mortimer, "I win over the whole range. All the small fellows will follow the Miller lead. If I go to the barbecue, maybe it will make her think I'm half a man, at least."

"Ah!" sighed Hancock. "A noble fellow. Ready to die for his cause, and all that. You bore me, Harry. Mind leaving me to my rum punch?"

MORTIMER went out and passed through the cookshack where his men sat with platters of rapidly disappearing fried steaks.

"Hi, Chief," called Pudge Major. "Are you giving me your share?"

"He can't eat," suggested Chip Ellis. "The Miller gal fed him up to the teeth."

"He's lovesick!" shouted Bud McGee.

They were all roaring with laughter as he passed them and entered the kitchen, where Shorty was stubbing about on his wooden leg.

"What's the lowest a man can be, Shorty?" asked Mortimer, sitting down on the window sill.

"Cabin boy on a South Seas tramp," answered Shorty instantly.

"How about a man who tells a girl he loves her, and doesn't mean it?"

"You take it with females," said Shorty, "and the rules are all different. Now over there in Japan—"

"A girl, Shorty, as straight as a ruled line, even if she's as mean as a bobcat."

"Why, if she is straight and a gent makes her crooked—why, they got a special place in hell for them, Chief," said Shorty.

Mortimer went back into the cookshack and announced: "No work this afternoon, boys."

"You mean a holiday, Chief?" asked huge Jan Erickson.

"I'm going to a party," said Mortimer, "and I've never asked you to work when I wasn't, have I?"

"Where's the party?" asked Pudge.

"Over the hills and far away," said Mortimer.

III

MORTIMER prepared for the birthday party by scrubbing in cold water. Then he dressed in rather battered whites, climbed into the one-ton truck, and got ready to drive off and deliver himself at the barbecue.

Charles Hancock appeared unexpectedly in the ranchhouse doorway, a fat, red-faced wavering figure.

"If you want to take that Miller girl into camp," he called, "you'd better get yourself a five-thousand-dollar automobile."

Mortimer looked at him in silent disgust, then drove away through the white heat of the afternoon.

When he finally rolled up the trail onto Miller range, others were arriving in swaying automobiles, in carts and buggies, and on mustangs, but he knew he would be the most unexpected guest at the event.

The martial music of a band reached him. It sounded apropos. He felt like a soldier going into battle as he reached the great arch of evergreens which had been built over the entrance to the Miller headquarters.

Sam Pearson, the Cross M foreman, ranged up and down by the gate giving the first welcome to the arrivals, and the first drink out of a huge punchbowl which was cooled in a packing of dry ice. When he saw Mortimer, he stood agape with a dripping glass in his hand. Then he came slowly up to the truck, his eyes narrowed.

"What kind of legs have you got to stand on, Mortimer?" he asked. "What you think is goin' to hold you up all day?"

"Beginner's luck," said Mortimer.

The foreman held out the glass.

"Have this on me," he said. "You got so much nerve I wish I liked you."

Mortimer drove on and parked between the corrals behind the house. He climbed to the ground and went on to the ranchhouse with a feeling that his last bridge had been burned.

The crowd gave him some comfort. He might lose himself among the numbers who drifted beneath the trees surrounding the ranchhouse. The gala air furnished by the colored lanterns which swung from the lower branches helped, also. But he was noticed at once. A rumor ran ahead of him on invisible feet. Whispers spread, and amazed eyes were continually staring at him.

He assumed an air of unconcern, but the weight of an automatic was the sort of companionship he wanted right then.

He kept an eye out for Louise Miller as he wandered through the crowd. He went down by the big open-air dance floor, where the band played and where a ring had been built for the wrestling and boxing which were to be part of the entertainment, but she was not there.

In an open glade, a huge steer was turning on a great spit against a backing of burning logs, but roast beef would be only one dish among many, for in enormous iron pots chickens and ducks were simmering, and in scores of Dutch ovens geese, saddles of venison, and young pigs were roasting. There were kegs of beer and ale, kegs of whisky, an incredible number of bowls of rosy punch, and such an air of plenty as Mortimer had never looked on before.

As he turned away from the roasting steer he saw two big cowpunchers, dressed as Mexicans, solidly barring his way and offering fight as clearly as boys ever offered it in a school yard. Mortimer side-stepped them and went on, with their insulting laughter in his ears. They were following him.

Other men began to be aware of him. He heard derisive voices calling:

"The land doctor!"

"Give him a start home!"

"Help him on his way!"

He shrugged, and made himself walk slowly to maintain a casual dignity, but he felt his neck muscles stiffening. When he stumbled, guffaws sounded around him, and he felt as though a great beast were breathing at his shoulder.

It was in that moment that he saw a girl come swiftly through the crowd. Louise Miller was panting with haste as she came up to him.

"Are you crazy—coming here?" she demanded.

"I thought you asked me," said Mortimer.

"Come back to the house with me," she said. "I've got to talk with you and get you away. I've never heard of anything so idiotic. Didn't you see them closing in around you?"

"Just a lot of big, harmless, happy boys," said Mortimer, and she glanced up sharply to see the irony of his smile.

THEY went through the patio, under the clumsy arches, and on into the house. She led him into a library. A vague murmur of voices sounded through the wall from the next room, but Lou was too intent on him to notice.

"Sit down here," she commanded. "I'll walk around. Harry Mortimer, listen to me!"

He lighted a cigarette as he leaned back in the chair and watched her.

"It isn't my fault that you've come," she said. "You knew it wasn't a real invitation, didn't you? Ask you up here into a den of wildcats? You knew I didn't intend that!"

"What *did* you intend then?" he asked.

Suddenly she pulled up a chair opposite him and sat down with her chin on her fist, staring at him.

"You know," she said. "Those fences—the silly fall I took—and then I wasn't making too good sense when I argued with you. It was a sort of crazy idea of having the last word, leaving a challenge. Oh, but I'm sorry!"

The lowering and softening of her voice led him to look at her steadily.

"I'm not sorry," he told her. "I'm right here in the castle of the cattle baron. Perhaps he'll listen to reason now."

"Because he can see that you're ready to die for your cause? No, he'll never listen! He's as set as an old army mule, and as savage as a hungry grizzly. He's in the next room now, Harry, and I've got to get you away before he—"

The door to the next room opened and the deep, booming voice of John Miller sounded, saying:

"We'll announce Lou's engagement to you before the evening's over, Fred."

"But, Mr. Miller, if we hurry her—" said a big handsome fellow in the doorway, a man as blond as Norway and built like a football tackle.

"She's made up her mind, and that's enough for me," declared John Miller, leading the way into the library.

His daughter and Mortimer were on their feet. In Lou's first panic she had touched Mortimer's arm to draw him away, but he refused to avoid the issue.

When John Miller recognized Mortimer he ran a hand back through the silver of his long hair and grew inches taller with rage. He took a quick step or two toward Mortimer before another thought stopped him and he remembered that no matter who the man might be, he was a guest in the Miller home. In the rancher's bright blue eyes twin devils were shining when he came up and took Mortimer's hand.

"Mr. Frederick Wilson, Mr. Mortimer" he said. "Ah, I see that you and Louise are old friends."

He was in a sweat of white anger, though he forced himself to keep smiling. Frederick Wilson, who could not help but see that something was decidedly wrong, looked quizzically from his fiancée to Mortimer.

"I'm sorry that I was here when you wanted to speak privately," said Mortimer.

"But I can trust you not to spread the word in the crowd?" exclaimed Miller. "I want it as a surprise."

As Mortimer was turning to go through the door he heard Louise exclaiming:

"But an announcement!"

"Have you two minds or one?" demanded her father. "If you have only one, it's already made up. Now, what the devil is the meaning of Mortimer being here in my house, when the poisonous rat has been doing everything he can to—"

Mortimer was quickly out of earshot, through the patio, and heading into the woods where the barbecue was under way, with the music of the band booming in his ear.

He was not noticed immediately, and tried to interest himself in the people who were the Miller guests, for they included every type, from tough old-timers in overalls, to roaring punchers from all over the range, and white-clad citizens of Poplar Springs, the nearby town.

Near the glade where the roasting ox hissed above the fire, he saw several men who moved through the crowd in a compact group, and in a moment he recognized the blond head of Jan Erickson! His boys were there, all eight of them! They gathered around him with shouts and a rush.

He took Pudge Major by the lapels of his coat and shook him.

"You're behind this, Pudge," he said. "You're the only one who could have guessed I was coming here. Now, you and the rest get out! D'you know that every man jack in this crowd is heeled? And if trouble starts they'll shoot you boys into fertilizer."

"And what about you?" asked Pudge.

"I'm having a little game," said Mortimer.

"Yeah, and when you're tagged, you'll stay 'it,'" answered Dink Waller. "We'll just hang around and make a kind of a background."

"Listen to me!" commanded Mortimer. "I'm ordering you all back to the Hancock place!"

"This is time off," George Masters objected. "Your orders ain't worth a damn this afternoon, Chief. We're where we want to be, and we're going to stay."

HALF GRINNING, half guilty-looking they confronted Mortimer, and he surrendered with a shrug. But he felt as though he were walking into the center of a fire with eight sticks of dynamite.

A thundering loud-speaker at that moment called the guests to the platform entertainment. Mortimer and his men drifted with the others toward the dance floor, and Mortimer looked on with half-seeing eyes at dancers doing the buck and wing, at a competition in rope tricks, at a pair of slick magicians,

[*Turn page*]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST

Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.

at wrestlers, at a flashy bit of lightweight boxing, at an old fellow who demonstrated how Colts with their triggers filed off were handled in the old days.

He was still wondering how he could roll his eight sticks of dynamite out of the fire when a huge, black-haired cowboy got into the ring to box three rounds with a fellow almost as tall as he was, and robed from head to foot with a beautiful coverage of muscles. Mortimer thought vaguely that there was something familiar about the blond head of the second man, and when the fellow turned, he recognized the handsome face of Frederick Wilson, smiling and confident.

The reason for his confidence was apparent as soon as the gong was struck and the two went into action.

"He's got a left, is what that Wilson's got," said Lefty Parkman. "He's got an educated left, and look at him tie it onto Blackie!"

The big puncher rushed in to use both hands, as he had done many a time in saloon brawls, but always this time to bump his face against a snapping jab. When he stood still to think the matter over, he lowered his guard a trifle, and through the opening Frederick Wilson cracked a hammer-hard right hand that sagged the knees of the range man.

"What a sock!" Lefty Parkman rubbed his hands together. "But Blackie don't know how to fall!"

The cowboy, though his brains were adrift, still tried to fight, while Wilson, with a cruelly smiling patience, followed him, measured him, and then flattened him with an accurate one-two that bumped the head of Blackie soundly on the canvas.

Friends carried him away, while the crowd groaned. Only a few applauded with vigor. But Louise Miller, seated on the special dais, turned her head away.

That sort of fighting was not to her taste, it appeared.

IV

FREDERICK WILSON had quickly discovered that the fight had not pleased the crowd. He lifted a gloved hand for silence. When it came, he called in a ringing voice:

"My friends, if anybody else will step up, I'll try to please you more the next time."

Instantly Mortimer was getting to his feet.

"You're crazy," groaned Lefty. "He can *box*. He'll spear you like a salmon! He'll murder you!"

But Mortimer only waved to attract attention. A bell had rung in his mind telling him that here was his chance to get the entire range on his side. They despised him for his book learning. If he could make them applaud him as a man the whole story might be different.

Hostile cries were breaking out as he was recognized.

"It's the dirt doctor!" someone shouted. Others took it up:

"Eat him up, tenderfoot!"

"Give him the dirt he wants, Wilson!"

"I'll try to help you entertain," Mortimer called to Frederick Wilson, and hurried back to the dressing tent.

He had a glimpse of Lou's puzzled face and of John Miller fairly gloating with expectancy.

In the tent he rigged himself in fighting togs, then Lefty took him through the crowd, pouring savage advice at him.

"Keep your left hand up!" he cautioned. "Don't mind if he raises some bumps with his left. It's his right that rings all the bells. Don't give him a clean shot with it. Keep jabbin'. Work in close, and hammer the body. If you get a chance try the old one-two—and heaven help you, Chief!"

The strained, anxious faces of Mortimer's own men was the last he saw as he squared off with Wilson after the bell. Then a beautiful straight left flashed in his eyes. He ducked under it and dug both hands into what should

have been the soft of Wilson's body, but it was like punching India rubber.

They came out of the clinch with the crowd suddenly roaring applause for the dirt doctor, but Wilson was smiling as he came in again behind the beautiful, reaching straight left. Mortimer side-stepped and used his own straight left. It landed neatly, but high on the face. As Wilson shifted in, Mortimer nailed him with the one-two in which Lefty Parkman had drilled him so remorselessly. It stopped Wilson like a wall.

Mortimer jumped in with a long, straight left to follow his advantage, amidst roars of applause. Because of the inevitable sympathy that is always with the underdog in the West, even the dirt doctor was cheered as he plunged at the big expert in fisticuffs.

What happened then Mortimer did not exactly know. He felt his left slither over Wilson's shoulder. Then a stick of dynamite exploded in his brain.

He had hurt his knees. That was the first thing he actually knew. And he heard a tremendous noise made by shouting people. He was on hands and knees on the floor of the ring, with the referee swaying an arm up and down as he counted:

"—five—six—seven—"

Mortimer reeled to his feet. He saw Wilson coming toward him, and ducked under the two-handed attack, but the glancing weight of it carried him against the ropes. Punches hammered him, head and body, alternately. He saw his opponent's tight-lipped smile of pleasure. The man loved this.

A bursting rage gave Mortimer strength to fight on. His head was fairly clear now. He threw another long left. And again he felt his arm glance harmlessly over Wilson's shoulder. Again a blow struck him from nowhere and exploded a bomb in his brain.

Something rapped sharply against the back of his head. That was the canvas.

He seemed to be swimming out of a river of blackness with a current that shot him toward disaster. Fiercely he struggled—and found himself turning on one side, while the swaying arm of the referee moved like a metronome as again he counted:

"—six—seven—eight—"

He got to his knees and through a dun-colored fog saw John Miller waving his arms in exultation. But Lou's face was once more turned away.

Mortimer got to his feet as the count of ten began. He ducked under Wilson's big arms and held on. Then the bell rang for the end of that round, and Lefty Parkman savagely was dragging him to his corner.

HIS whole eight men were around him, big Erickson weeping with rage, while he and Pudge Major and Dink Waller swung towels. Chip Ellis and George Masters were massaging Mortimer's legs, while Bud McGee rubbed his stomach muscles to restore normal tension, and Baldy Inman held the water bottle. Lefty Parkman groaned instructions at his ear.

"Lefty, what's he hitting me with?" begged Mortimer.

"Listen, dummy!" said Parkman. "When you try the straight left he don't try to block it. He lets it come and side-steps. He lets it go over his shoulder, then he comes in with a right uppercut and nails you. You got no chance! Lemme say that you've broke your arm! He'll kill you, Chief, and if he does Jan Erickson is going to kill him, and there'll be hell all over the lot! Lemme throw in the towel!"

"If you throw in the towel—" Mortimer said through his teeth, then the gong sounded and he stepped out, feeling as though he were wading against a stiff current of water.

Wilson came right in at him, fiddling with a confident left to make way for a right-hander that would finish the bout. Mortimer could hear the crowd stamping and shouting:

"Sock him, Doc!"

"Break a hole in him!"

"Plow him up!"

"Hi, Doctor Dirt!"

Wilson dismissed this cheering for the underdog with a twitching grin and lowered his right to invite a left lead.

Lefty Parkman's instructions remained in Mortimer's brain as he saw the opening. It was only a long feint that he used, but instantly Parkman's wisdom was apparent. Without attempting to block the punch, Wilson sidestepped to slip the blow and, dropping his right, stepped in for a lifting uppercut, his eyes narrowed to a glint of white as he concentrated on the knockout wallop.

That was what Mortimer had hoped for. He held the feint for an instant until his body almost swayed forward off-balance. Then he used the one-two which Lefty had made him master. The right went to the chin no harder than the tapping hammer of the master blacksmith. It gave the distance, the direction for the sledge-hammer left that followed, and through the soft, thick padding of the glove Mortimer felt his knuckles lodge against the bone of the jaw. He had hit with his full power and Wilson had stepped straight into the blow.

It buckled Wilson's knees. He covered up instinctively, lurching forward to clinch. Over his shoulder Mortimer saw John Miller with his hands dangling limply. He had no applause for this startling change of fortune. But Lou was on her feet, bent forward.

Even as he glimpsed this he lifted two blows to Wilson's head and sent him swaying back on his heels. The man's whole body was open to the next blow, and strained taut, as though a hand had stretched a throat for the butcher's knife. Mortimer plunged his right straight into that defenseless target and doubled it up like a jack-knife.

He stepped back as Wilson fell to his knees, embracing his tormented body with one arm. The other hand gestured to the referee.

"Foul!" said Wilson's lips.

"Get up and fight!" ordered the referee, as he began his count.

He was a tough fellow, this referee who had done some fighting himself in the East, and the lingo of the ring had never been forgotten. As the crowd howled, he larded the count with rare words:

"—three, you yellow skunk—four, for a four-flusher—five, a coyote is St. Patrick beside you—six, for a ring-tailed rat—"

Wilson struggled to one knee, his twisted face indicating agony. Mortimer saw John Miller shake both fists in the air, then turn his back in disgust. Mortimer's interest in the fight ended at that moment. He hardly cared when the referee counted Wilson out. But as he climbed through the ropes, the hands of his eight men reached up to clutch him in congratulation.

"You got it just the way I wanted!" Lefty Parkman rejoiced in the dressing tent. "You plastered the sucker just as he stepped in. Oh, baby, if you chuck this ranching, I'll make a light heavyweight champ out of you inside three years! Bacon three times a day, and eggs all day Sunday! Say, Chief, will you make a try at it?"

MORTIMER smiled at him vaguely. He had something of far greater importance to think about than a ring career, for recalling the enthusiastic voices that had applauded him as he left the ring, it seemed to him that he might have broken through the solid hedge of hostility which had hemmed him in for two years.

There remained one great step to take. If he could win over Lou Miller, it would be the greatest evening of his life. And he had determined to play his cards like a crooked gambler, if necessary, to win.

"Start drifting around," he told Lefty. "Circulate a little and find out how John Miller took the fading of big Wilson. I'll see you later at the barbecue."

In his anxiety about further consequences he hardly knew what food he tasted when he found a plate at one of the long tables in the barbecue glade, but he was keenly aware of favorable and critical eyes which kept studying him. It was plain that while he had won over a large number of the hostile, his work was not nearly ended.

Then Lefty Parkman leaned at his shoulder and murmured:

"Miller is sour. He must have had a big roll on that Wilson. When you dropped Wilson, Miller said he wished you'd never showed your face on the range."

That was serious enough, but Lou Miller's grave face when she passed him a little later was even more to the point. She was drifting about among the tables to see that everyone was served. When she passed Mortimer all recognition was dead in her eyes. But when he turned his head to look after her, she made a slight gesture toward the trees. He waited only a moment before he left the table and followed her.

She led him through swaying lantern light that set the tree trunks wavering, and on through silver drippings of moonlight until she reached the edge of the woods. When he came up, she said quietly:

"You must leave at once. Some of the men here hate you, Harry. And my father won't believe you beat Fred Wilson fairly. He thinks there must have been a foul blow, as Fred claims!"

V

ALL HOPE of winning John Miller over vanished completely. But if Louise were to be placed in immediate charge of the ranch she would be gain enough. Mortimer made a desperate try.

"I can't leave," he said.

She came closer to him and laid a hand on his arm. The moonlight that slid through a gap in the leaves overhead made silver of her hair, her throat, and her hand.

"You don't understand me," she said. "I mean that there's really danger for you here."

"From your father?" he asked.

"No!" she answered. "But there are a hundred men here who are sure Father would be glad if you were run off the range. You have to go—now!"

He was silent.

"Will you listen to me?" she repeated anxiously. "Harry, I know you want the entire range to accept your ideas. Maybe you're right about them, but none of us can believe it. Do what a smart man ought to do. Give up! Try some other place where your brains will tell. You've spent two years on this range. You can waste twenty more and never get anywhere."

"Lou," he asked, "do you ever talk like a girl?"

She laughed a little and stepped back from him. "Well, what's to come now?"

He drew a slow, deep breath, for he had made up his mind that she was no more than a unit of the enemy to be won over. But now as the moon touched her beauty with such a reverent hand he despised himself for what he was about to attempt. Still he forced himself to go on with his plan.

"Has it ever seemed a little strange to you," he said, "that I've given up two years of my life to a country where I was damned before I started, and where I have to share profits and work under a drunk like Charlie Hancock?"

"I've never been able to understand you," she sighed.

"But you've noticed me carrying on? And until recently you've seen me hounding your father to get his support?"

"Of course," she said.

"Well, can you think of anything except plain idiocy that would keep me here?" he demanded.

"I'm trying to think," she answered.

"Remember two years ago?" he asked. "You were out here from school. Easter vacation. I was standing in front

of the Hancock place when you rode Hampton over the hill and down into the hollow, then zoomed away beside the ruins of the old windmills. Wings got hold of my heart and lifted me after you."

He took another breath after the lie. Louise was as still as stone. The moonlight seemed to have frozen her and the airy lightness of her dress.

"What about the announcement of that engagemnet?" he asked harshly.

"There won't be any announcement," she replied. "It's ended. Harry, what are you trying to tell me? You've hardly looked twice at me in two years."

"I was the romantic jackass," he said. "The stranger with great vision and strong hands. I was going to change the whole range, then offer you my work in one hand and my heart in the other, like some driveling fool in a book. I *have* been a fool, Lou, but don't laugh at me if you can help it."

"I won't laugh," she said.

"I thought that if I ruled out everything but the work," he went on, "I'd get my reward. Instead, I have people laughing at me. And I suppose I dreamed that you were receiving telepathic messages from the fool across the valley who loved you."

"Love?" said the girl. "Love?"

"Before I get out, beaten, I had to tell you the truth," he lied, and yet as he looked at her he wondered if it was a lie.

A thudding of hoofbeats and a creaking of leather came through the trees behind them. She made a gesture of resignation.

"I can't laugh," she said. "I believe I'm crazy, and I know I'm dizzy. It's the moonlight, isn't it? The crazy moonlight. You're not making me fall in love like this, are you?"

From the trees came riders, the hoofbeats deadened by the leaf mold. There were a dozen of them, with sombreros pulled low and bandannas drawn up over their mouths.

"Stand back from him, you!" one of them sang out, and as Louise sprang away, startled, something whistled in the air over Mortimer's head.

The snaky shadow of a rope dropped across his vision, then he was grappled by the noose which pinned his arms against his sides.

SAM PEARSON, foreman of the huge Cross M Ranch, was on the saddle end of the rope with a hundred and ninety pounds of muscle behind it. He had no direct orders from Miller, but indirect suggestions had been enough for Pearson. He felt that it was an affront to the entire Miller legend to have this interloper on the ranch at the barbecue. He experienced a virtuous thrill as he settled that noose around Mortimer's arms.

Sam's mount, his best cutting horse, spun like a top and took Mortimer in tow at a mild canter over the flat, then down the slope of the Chappany Valley. Louise Miller's screamed protest died out behind them, drowned by the uproar made by Pearson's punchers. All had plenty of liquor under their belts; all felt they were striking a good stroke for the best cause in the world—loyalty to their outfit. They howled as they dashed back and forth around Pearson and his captive. And more than one quirt snapped in an expert hand to warm the seat of Mortimer's pants.

Mortimer kept up a good sprint, which prevented him from falling on his face and being dragged, until they came over the edge of the level and dropped onto the slant ground, with the five Chappany lakes glimmering silver-bright in the hollow beneath them.

Then Pearson's rope went slack, and Mortimer spun head over heels like a huge tumbleweed. It was so deliciously funny to Sam Pearson that he reeled in the saddle with hearty laughter.

He was still howling with joy, and shrill cowboy yells were echoing, when a most unexpected thing happened. For the whirling, topsy-turvy body of Harry Mortimer regained footing and balance

for an instant and, like a great black cat, he flung himself onto Monte McLean, who rode close to his side.

Silver-clear moonlight showed Monte defending himself from that savage and unexpected attack. Monte was a good, two-handed fighter and he whanged Mortimer over the head and shoulders with the loaded butt of his quirt. But, unheeding, Mortimer swarmed up the side of the horse and wrapped Monte in his arms.

This put Pearson in a quandary. If he yanked Mortimer off that mustang, he would bring Monte to the ground with him. If he didn't yank Mortimer off the horse, the Easterner would probably throttle Monte and get away on Monte's mount. Pearson groaned. He never should have kept the tenderfoot in such a loose rope that he could work his arms and hands up through the noose. Now Monte was held around the waist in a viselike grip.

Then other trouble came on the run toward Sam Pearson. A ringing cry came, and a girl on a horse stretched in a dead gallop came tilting over the upper edge of the slope. Lou Miller! She was a Western girl all right, but there was a limit to the feminine sense of humor, and likely she thought this was a lynching party instead of a bit of range discipline. The idea actually had been to start Mortimer running toward the horizon and encourage him to keep on until he was out of sight.

Sam Pearson didn't know what to do, so he did the most instinctive thing, which was to give a good tug on the rope. Both Monte and Mortimer slewed sideward from the saddle and spilled to the ground.

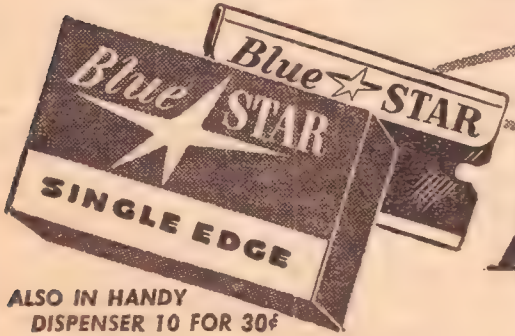
They kept on rolling for a dozen yards, then lay still, one stretched beside the other. Big Sam Pearson leaped from his horse and dived for Monte. He picked up the fallen puncher whose lax body spilled across his arm.

[*Turn page*]

A Dollar's Worth of Shaving Pleasure *for a Dime!*

Smoother, easier, faster shaves every time because Blue Star Blades are ground and honed in oil

Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how much shaving pleasure it gives you for so little money. Shave and save with Blue Star today.



ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 FOR 30¢

ONLY 10¢ A PACKAGE

Blue STAR

SINGLE EDGE RAZOR BLADES

PRECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N. Y.

"Monte!" he shouted. "Hey, Monte! A little spill like that didn't do nothin' to you, did it? Hey, Monte, can't you hear me?"

The other cowboys came piling up on their horses, bringing a fog-white rolling of dust that poured over Monte. Presently rousing with a groan, he brought a cheer from them. They set him up on his feet and felt him from head to foot for broken bones.

"Put him into a saddle," said Sam Pearson. "Old Monte'll be himself when he feels the stirrup under his feet."

So they put Monte into a saddle and steadied him there. He reached out with a fumbling hand for the reins and mumbled:

"He kind of got hold of me like a wildcat, and he wouldn't loosen up."

"Sam Pearson!" Louise Miller cried wildly, "Sam, you've killed him! You've killed him!"

THE foreman turned and saw her on her knees beside Mortimer's prostrate body. But at that moment Harry groaned and sat up.

"Let's get out of here on the jump, boys!" Pearson said. "Maybe we scratched up more hell'n we reckoned on."

He hit the saddle and, in the center of the cavalcade, struck out at a gallop for the ranchhouse, with the wavering Monte held erect by two riders. Pearson wanted to get in his own report to an employer who had never yet been hard on him.

Mortimer, sitting up with his head bowed by shock and the nausea of deep pain and bruises, saw the world dimly for a moment. He felt an increasing sharp pain from a tear in his scalp where the braided handle of Monte's quirt had glanced. Then he was aware of a warm, trickle of blood down the side of his face and dripping off his chin.

"Come back Sam!" he heard a girl's voice shouting. "Sam. Come back!"

Then two hands were on his cheeks, tilting back his head.

"They've killed him!" whispered Lou Miller. "The cowards! The cowards! They've killed Harry Mortimer!"

He could not see her clearly because the dazzle of the moon was above her head, and to his bleared eyes her face was almost featureless shadow. But the moon shone over one bare shoulder, where the chiffon had been torn away during her headlong riding. All this he saw clearly enough, though he could not make connected sense of any of it.

He could not make head nor tail of what had happened immediately before either, and it seemed to him that he was still telling Lou, even now, that he loved her, though his brain reeled and the nausea kept his stomach uneasy.

That may have been the reason why he said:

"If I were dying, I'd want to say a last thing to you, Lou. I love you."

"Harry, are you dying, darling?" she cried desperately. "Oh, don't say that!"

She took his head and shoulders across her lap and in her arms. There was still dust in the air, but there was a wonderful aroma of sweet cleanliness about her.

"I'm all right," he told her. Then he remembered, and his theme drove him on to repeat: "I love you! D'you laugh at me when I tell you I love you?"

"And I love you, Harry!" she answered simply. "Do you hear? Can you understand?"

VI

THE GIRL'S words registered one by one in Harry Mortimer's mind, but they had no connected meaning. For what he had said himself had been by rote, from a mentally rehearsed role into which he had projected himself.

"Tell me where you're hurt!" Lou pleaded. "Where is the worst pain, Harry?"

He closed his eyes, beginning to un-

derstand what she had said before. She had said she loved him—and through her he could bring a new future to the range, and happiness to thousands. If he could carry by assault only one small redoubt, the great fight would be won!

But that assault would have to be made in the future. Now, with closed eyes, he could only mutter: "You remind me of rippling water—clean wind."

She slipped his head from her lap and stood up. He heard cloth being torn into strips. Then the blood was being wiped from his face and a long bandage was wound about his head, firmly. But there was no pain. Wherever she touched him the pain disappeared. Then she had his head and shoulders in her lap again.

"Wherever you touch me—it's queer—the pain goes," said Mortimer.

"Because I love you!" said Louise.

He regarded her with a blank stare.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked.

"I'm loving you," she said. "Don't speak. Lie still. Only tell me where the pain is."

"God put a gift in your hands to take pain away," said Mortimer. "What color are your eyes?"

"Kind of a gray, blue-green," she said. "I don't know. Don't talk, Harry. Lie still."

One instant of real clarity came to him. He got to his feet with a sudden, immense effort and stood swaying.

"My men are back there in trouble!" he groaned. "Go stop the fight if you can! I'll be along."

"There'll be no more trouble. That coward, Sam Pearson, has made trouble enough for one night. But can you get into the saddle? I'll help. Lift your left foot."

He had his grip on the saddle-horn and stood with his head dropped against the sharp cantle, while the whirling, nauseating darkness spun through his brain. Her orders came to him, again, insistently. He raised his left foot. A hand guided it into the stirrup.

"Now one big heave, and you'll be in the saddle. Come on—up you go!"

He felt an ineffectual force tugging at him. His muscles automatically responded and he found himself slumped in the saddle, his head hanging. There was no strength in the back of his neck. He felt sick. But there was a battle yet to be fought.

"Are you gone?" he mumbled. "I love you!"

Then darkness swept over him again, though he managed to keep his hands locked on the pommel. His body was covered with cold runnels of sweat. A voice entered his mind, sometimes speaking clearly, sometimes as dim as though it were blowing away on a wind. Whenever he heard it, new strength came into him, and hope with it.

It told him to endure. It said they had reached the bridge. He heard his horse's hoofbeats strike hollow beneath him. Dimly he saw the silver of water under the moon. The voice said they were nearing the Tumbling H, if only he could hold on a little. But he knew he could not hold on. He was about to die, would never reach the ranchhouse.

And then, suddenly, the house was before him.

He steeled himself to dismount, to gather strength that would pull his leg over the back of the horse.

Then he was standing beside it, wavering.

He made a vast effort to steer his feet toward the lighted doorway. The girl tried to support him and guide him. Then many heavy footfalls rushed out, were about him. Jan Erickson's voice roared out like the furious bellowing of a bull. Jan's enormous hands and arms lifted him, took him through the doorway.

"Louise," Mortimer whispered, "I love you."

HE COULD make out her voice, but not the answering words. Clearer in his mind was the sense of wonderful relief in finding his men home safely.

He felt stinging tears of gratitude under his eyelids and kept his eyes closed, so that the tears should not be seen.

He could hear Lefty Parkman screech:

"Look at his face! Look at his *face!* Look what they've gone and done to the chief!"

And Pudge Major's strange, weeping whine:

"They dragged him! They took and dragged him like he was a coyote!"

"I'm goin' to kill some of 'em!" shouted Jan Erickson.

The stairs creaked. They were taking Mortimer up to a room. The air was much warmer inside the house, and he began to relax toward sleep.

Louise, running up the stairs behind the men, cried out that she wanted to help care for him. One of the brown-faced, big-shouldered fellows turned and looked at her as no man had ever looked at her before.

"Your sneaking ranch hands done this to the chief!" he accused. "Why don't you go back and crow about it, like the others are doin'? Go tell your pa we're goin' to have blood for this. We're goin' to wring it out, like water out of the Monday wash! Get out!"

Lefty Parkman left the house and sprinted away for a car to drive to Poplar Springs for a doctor.

Louise went silently down into the hall, and the angry, muttering voices of the men died away. She looked helplessly into the living room and saw Charles Hancock lying on his couch dressed in a robe of Chinese silk, with the materials for his rum punch on the table beside him. He got up when he saw her and waved his hand—a prematurely old boy, decayed scholar, and drunken satirist.

"Come in, Lou," he invited. "Your boys been having a time for themselves beating up Harry Mortimer? Come in and try this punch. You look as though you need it. You look as though you'd been through a stampede yourself!"

The bleared, leering eyes of Charlie Hancock made her uneasy. But she had to have an excuse for staying until she heard the doctor's opinion about Mortimer's condition. The picture of his dragging, tumbling body at the end of the rope kept running madly through her memory, as did the battered lips that said he loved her.

Love like that, confessed by a man with what he believed to be his dying breath was a sacred thing which few ever knew. The glory of it was like wings lifting her heart. The girl she had been that afternoon now was a stranger to her in thought and in feeling.

She was so filled with tenderness that she could look upon even that rum-bloated caricature of a man, Charles Hancock, with sympathy. Besides, he had been living in the same house with Harry Mortimer for two years, and from him she might draw a thousand priceless reminiscences about the man she loved.

She went to Hancock with a smile and shook his moist, fat hand warmly.

"I believe I will have a drink," she said. "I need one."

"Wang!" shouted Hancock. "Hot water! Take this chair, Lou. And don't look around too much. Our friend Mortimer says that this is a pigpen. He won't live here with me. That connoisseur of superior living prefers to spend most of his time with the gang of brutes in the big shed behind the house. Sings with 'em; sings for 'em; dances for 'em, just to make 'em laugh; plays cards with 'em; gives up his life to 'em. By the way, did your boys break any of the Mortimer bones?"

In his eyes was a look of cruelly cold expectancy. Loathing sent a shudder through Louise, but she kept smiling, wondering how Mortimer endured this man. All the love in her heart poured out toward the injured man above them, where heavy footfalls trampled back and forth and deep-throated, angry murmurings continued.

"I don't know how badly he's in-

jured," she said. "I don't think any bones—if there isn't internal injury—but surely God wouldn't let him be seriously hurt by brutes and cowards!"

Hancock looked at her with a glimmering interest in his eyes.

"Ah, ha!" he chuckled. "I see."

She had her drink, by that time, and paused in the careful sipping of it.

"You see what, Charlie?" she asked.

He laughed outright. "I put my money against it," he said. "I wouldn't have believed it."

"What?" she persisted.

"For my part," said Hancock, "I love living, Lou. I love to let the years go by placidly, because—do you know why?"

"I don't know," she answered, watching him anxiously and wondering how drunk he was.

He emptied his glass, and automatically began brewing another potion. His shoulders shook with subdued mirth.

"I don't want to be rude, but—" He broke into another peal of laughter.

Louise flushed. "I can't understand you at all, Charlie," she said.

"Can't understand *me*? Why? I'm one of the simple ones. I'm understood at a glance. I'm not a mysterious figure like Mortimer."

"Why is he mysterious?" she asked.

"To go in one direction for two years, and wind up on the opposite side—that's a mystery, isn't it?" asked Hancock, with a chuckle.

"Two years in one direction?" she repeated. Then she flushed, and hated herself for the color which she knew was flooding her face.

Hancock watched her with a surgeon's eye. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't have believed it," he murmured. "All in a tremor—and blushing. Mystery? Why, the man's loaded with mystery!"

"Charlie," she said, "if I understand what you're taking about, I don't like it very well."

"Oh, we'll change the subject then, of course," said Hancock. "Only thing I'm trained to do is to try to please the ladies. You never guessed that, Lou, did you? I don't succeed well, but I keep on trying."

"Trying to please women, you mean?" she asked.

"Yes, trying. But not like men of mystery do. They don't waste time on gestures. They simply step out—and bring home the bacon!"

He laughed again, rubbing his hands together.

"Are you talking about Harry Mortimer and me?" she asked, taking a deep breath as she forced herself to come to the point.

"Talking about nothing to offend you," said Hancock. "Wouldn't do it for the world. Can't tell you how I admire Mortimer. Shall I tell you why?"

She melted at once. "Yes, I want to hear it," she said.

"Ah, there you are with the shining eyes and the parted lips," said Hancock. "That's the picture he said *he* would paint, too. And here it is, painted!"

VII

HANCOCK'S words lifted Louise Miller slowly from her chair. He was laughing too heartily to be aware of her.

"Mystery?" he repeated. "Why, Harry Mortimer is the deepest man of mystery I've ever known in my life. There he was, blocked on every side in his mission of teaching us all how to use the range and button the grass to the ground permanently. He can't get past John Miller. But maybe he can get past an easier obstacle." He laughed again, adding, "But the rich Lou Miller, the beautiful Lou Miller, the spark of fire, the whistle in the wind, the picture that shines in every man's eyes—" Laughter drowned out his words.

She was standing stock-still, staring at him in horror.

"Sit down, Lou!" he said. "There's

nothing like an efficient man, which is why I love Harry Mortimer. If he can't win the men, he'll try the women. Two years in one direction gets him nothing, so he turns around and goes in the opposite direction—and all at once he's home! Wonderful, I call it. Simply wonderful! And in a single evening! Even if he's beaten up a bit, he comes safely home and brings Beauty beside the Beast. And me willing to bet against it."

"To bet?" The girl swaved, feeling a coldness of face as though a strong wind were blowing against her.

"Sit down, Lou," Hancock repeated.

"No, I have to go home. The barbecue—hundreds of people there. Goodby, Charlie!"

"Oh, but you can't go like this. I have a thousand things to tell you about Mortimer."

"I think I've heard enough," said Louise. "I didn't realize that he was such a man of—of mystery. But I suppose you're right, Charlie."

She felt bitter emotion suddenly choking her, for she was remembering how Mortimer, half-stunned and wandering in mind after his fall, had clung to one monotonous refrain, telling her over and over that he loved her. A fighting man, he had clung like a bulldog to his intention of winning her even when his brain was barely functioning.

In her mind's eye she could see the two men talking in this room, with laughter shaking the paunch of Charlie Hancock as he bet Mortimer he couldn't go to the barbecue and put Lou Miller in his pocket. Shame struck her with the edge and coldness of steel. She turned suddenly and hurried out to Hampton....

When Mortimer wakened late that night his brain was clear, and only when he moved did he feel the soreness of bruised muscles.

"How you coming, Chief?" asked Jan Erickson's voice.

He looked up into the face of the huge Swede, who was leaning from his chair, a shadow wrapped in bright moonlight.

"I'm fine," said Mortimer. "Go to bed. Jan."

"I ain't sleepy," declared Jan Erickson. "Tell me who done it to you."

"A few drunken cowboys," said Mortimer.

"That big Wilson one of 'em? The feller you licked?"

"No, he wasn't."

"That's good," said Erickson, "because he's taken and run away. He didn't like the side of the range you showed him, so he run home. But who was the others?"

"I didn't recognize them," lied Mortimer.

"It was Cross M men, wasn't it?" persisted Jan.

"Stop bothering me and go to bed, Jan," answered Mortimer.

"How many was there?" insisted Erickson.

"A crowd. I couldn't recognize anyone. Forget it."

Erickson was silent for a moment, then his whisper reached Mortimer:

"Strike me dead if I forget it!"

Mortimer was not roused in the morning when Charlie Hancock's punchers clumped down the stairs with jingling spurs. He slept on until almost noon, then wakened to find the wind whistling and moaning around the house and the temperature fallen enough to put a shiver in his body. When he stood up, there was only a little stiffness in his muscles. It was apparent, he thought, that he simply had been punch-drunk the night before.

A BUCKET of water in a galvanized iron washtub made him a bath. As he sloshed the chill water over his body, memory returned to the previous evening. He could remember the nodding head of Hampton, bearing him forward through a whirling murk, and the nausea, and his own voice saying, "I love you!" That memory shamed him all the more as he recalled the tenderness of Louise's voice and how her arms had held him.

Mental lightning jagged before Mortimer's eyes and split open his world to the core. A sense of guilt ran with his pulses, but he swore she never would know if a lifetime of devotion could keep her from the knowledge. He had gone to her ready to lie like a scoundrel, and he had come away with the thought of her filling his mind like a light.

Slowly toweling his body dry, he was seeing her again. That high-headed pride of hers now seemed to him no more than the expression of the jaunty soul which is born of the free range. That fierce loyalty which kept her true to her father would keep her true to a husband she loved. With her hand to open the door and give him authority, he would soon be able to give the grasslands eternal life!

He dressed with fumbling hands, and noted the purple bruised places and where the skin had rubbed away in spots. But there was nothing worth notice except a dark, swollen place that half covered his right eye and extended back across the temple. He could shrug at such injuries, if the scalp wound wasn't serious. When he had shaved, he went out to the barracks and let Shorty examine the cut.

Shorty washed the torn scalp, and wound a fresh bandage in place.

"Healin' up like nobody's business," he said. "Sit down and leave me throw a steak and a couple handfuls of onions into you, and you'll be as fine as a fiddle again."

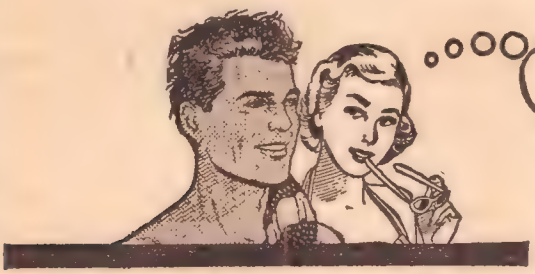
Mortimer was on his second cup of coffee before he realized that it was past noon and his gang had not yet showed up for food.

"Shorty, where the devil are the boys?" he asked. "You're not cooking dinner for them?"

"Well, the fact is that they sashayed off on a kind of a little trip," said Shorty.

Mortimer stared at him. "Without

[*Turn page*]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"...HE'S ALL AT SEA about Dry Scalp! He ought to know sun and salt water make hair dull and straggly. He needs before-swim and after-sunning care with 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp

TAKE THE SAME TIP for yourself and use 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and other signs of Dry Scalp . . . work wonders in the good looks of your hair. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . gives double care to scalp and hair. It's economical, too.

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK ®

Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.

VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

talking to me?" he demanded.

"They thought you'd be laid up today," said Shorty. "And so they kind of went and played hooky on you, Chief."

"Shorty, where did they go?" asked Mortimer, remembering vividly how Jan Erickson had tried to drag from him the identity of his assailants.

"How would I know?" asked Shorty.

Mortimer turned his back on the cook, for he knew he would get no information from him. He tried to think what that gang would do, but all that loomed before him was their savage, unquestioning devotion to him.

With a rush of sick apprehension, he wondered if they had gone straight to the Cross M to exact vengeance. But Lefty Parkman and Pudge Major were too level-headed to permit that. If they wanted to make trouble for the Cross M men they would go to Poplar Springs and try to find straggling groups from the big outfit. But if it came to firearms, his CCC lads would be helpless against the straight-shooting men of the range. He would be, himself.

He ran into the adjoining shed. The big truck was gone, but the one-ton truck remained, and he climbed into the seat in haste.

It was fifteen miles to Poplar Springs and he did the distance in twenty minutes.

As he drove he noted that the melancholy wind still mourned down the valley, but its force along the ground was nothing compared to the velocity of the upper air. Fast-traveling clouds, unraveled and spread thin, flattened the arch of the sky, with the sun sometimes golden, sometimes dull and green through that mist. The mountains had disappeared.

In Poplar Springs the streets had been laid out—a small checkering of precise little city blocks. Most of the life of the town came from the "springs." The waters were said to have some medicinal value. An old frame hotel spread its shambling wings around the water. A rising part of the town's business, however, was an aviation company which had built some hangars and used the huge flat east of the place as a testing ground.

Saturday nights were the bright moments for Poplar Springs, when cowboys from all the surrounding ranches rode into town or drove rattling automobiles in from the range to patronize the saloons which occupied almost every corner.

WHEREVER Mortimer saw a pedestrian he called:

"Seen anything of a six-foot-four Swede with hair as pale as blow-sand?"

At last he was directed to Porson's Saloon.

Porson's had been there in Poplar Springs since the earliest cattle days and the old swing doors with bullet-holes drilled through the panels were still in use. If Porson's had filed a notch for each man who had died in the place it would have been necessary to crowd fifty-three notches on one gun butt, for bar whisky and old cattle feuds and single-action Colts had drenched its floor with blood. Realization of the reputation of the place was ominous in Mortimer's mind as he pushed through the doors.

It was like stepping onto a stage set. The picture he dreaded to find was here in every detail. Jan Erickson, Pudge Major, Lefty Parkman, George Masters, and Dink Waller stood at the end of the bar nearest the door. Bunched at the farther end were eight of the Cross M punchers, with Sam Pearson dominating the group. The bartender, old "Rip" Porson himself, carrying his seventy years like a bald-headed eagle, and unperturbed by the menace in the air, calmly went about serving drinks.

Mortimer stood a moment inside the door, with his brain whirling. The Miller punchers looked at him with interest. Not one of his own men turned a head toward him, but Lefty Parkman said in a low voice:

"The chief!"

"He ought to be home!" Dink Waller growled. "This is our job."

"It's time for a round on the house, boys," said Rip Porson. "And I want to tell you somethin'. The first man that goes for iron while he's drinkin' on the house, he gets a slug out of my own gun. Here's to you, one and all!"

He put out the bottles of rye and, as glasses were filled, he lifted his own glass in a steady red claw.

The two factions continued to stare with fascinated attention at each other, eye holding desperately to eye as though the least shift in concentration would cause disaster. They raised their glasses as Rip Porson proposed his toast:

"Here's to them that shoot straight—and damn the man that breaks the mirror!"

VIII

IN silence the Cross M men and Mortimer's CCC gang drank.

Mortimer walked to the bar. He chose a place directly between the two hostile groups, exactly in the field of fire, if guns should be drawn.

"I'll have a beer," he said.

Rip Porson dropped his hands on the edge of the bar and regarded Mortimer with bright, red-veined eyes.

"You're the one that the trouble's all about, ain't you?" he asked. "You're Harry Mortimer, ain't you?"

"I am," said Mortimer. "And there's going to be no more trouble."

Porson poured his beer. The ghost of a smile glimmered in his old eyes.

"Set 'em up, Porson," said Jan Erickson's low, deep voice.

"Set 'em up over here, too," commanded Sam Pearson.

Porson pushed the whisky bottles into place again.

"Lefty!" he said.

But Lefty Parkman gave not the slightest sign that he had heard. He had picked out a single face among the Cross M men and was staring at that man with concentrated hatred. Odds made no difference to Lefty, even odds when one faction all wore guns and the other had only their fists.

"Lefty!" repeated Mortimer.

Lefty's eyes wavered toward his chief.

"Turn around and walk out the door," said Mortimer "We're getting out of here, and you're leading the way."

Lefty's glance slipped definitely away from Mortimer's. For the first time an order from Harry Mortimer went disregarded.

Among Sam Pearson's men was a bow-legged cowpuncher named Danny Shay, barrel-chested, bull-browed, and as solid as the stump of a big tree. The resonant croak of a bullfrog was in his voice as he rumbled: "There ain't room enough in here for 'em. We got the air kind of used up, maybe."

Pudge Major lurched from his place and walked straight toward the Cross M cowhands.

"Come back, Pudge!" commanded Mortimer.

Pudge strode on, unheeding. "You look like an ape when you laugh," Pudge said to Danny Shay. "When you open your face that wide, I can see the baboon all the way down."

Jed Wharton, one of Pearson's punchers, hit Pudge on the chin with a lifting punch. As Pudge rocked back on his heels big Wharton followed with a driving blow from which Pudge Major cringed away with both hands flung up and a strange little cry of fear that made Mortimer's blood run cold. Poor Pudge had gone for game too big for him, and the sight of the white feather among his men struck into Mortimer's brain like a hand of doom.

In the leering, triumphant faces of the Cross M men he saw the charge that was about to follow. The man next to Pearson was already drawing his Colt. Mortimer had no chance to glance at his own boys, but they must be as

heartsick at Pudge's frightened outcry as he was himself. And he remembered the barking voice of an assistant football coach hounding him into scrimmage:

"Low, Mortimer! Tackle low!"

"Tackle low!" yelled Mortimer, and dived at Sam Pearson's knees.

While he was still in the air, from the corner of his eye he saw Lefty swarming in to the attack, and the blond head of the gigantic Erickson. Then his shoulder banged into Pearson's knees, and the whole world seemed to fall on his back.

It was not the sort of barroom fighting a Westerner would expect. That headlong plunge and Erickson's charge jammed the Cross M boys against the wall. In the midst of confusion Mortimer caught at stamping feet and struggling legs and pulled down all he could reach.

He put his knees on Pearson's neck and pressed on toward Danny Shay, who had fallen like a great frog, on hands and knees. Mortimer jerked his elbow into Danny's face and stood up in the space the bull-voiced cowboy had occupied.

Guns were roaring, by that time. As Mortimer straightened, he saw a Colt being leveled at him over the shoulder of another man. But an arm and fist like a brass-knuckled walking beam struck, and the gunman disappeared.

Jan Erickson was at work. And in a close brawl Jan was peerless.

As Mortimer struck out, he saw old Rip Porson standing behind the bar, shaking his head in profound disgust.

MORTIMER saw Pudge Major in the ruckus also. As though fear had turned into madness, Pudge came in screeching like a fighting cat. The butt of a clubbed revolver knocked him back against the wall, but he rebounded, swinging a chair which landed with a crash of splintering wood. Sam Pearson, who had managed to regain his feet, went down again—and suddenly Mortimer saw that the fight was ended.

The men Erickson had hit solidly were down, to remain down. Dink Waller was patiently throttling his victim with a full Nelson. Lefty was pounding a defenseless cowboy against the wall. George Masters was staggering toward the noise of battle, but the fight was ended.

The attack had been so quick and close in, that most of the cowboys' guns had not even been drawn. Hardly half a dozen bullets had hit ceiling or floor. Not a single shot had struck flesh, but the bar mirror had been drilled cleanly through the center and from that hole a hundred cracks jagged outward.

"Take their guns!" shouted Mortimer. "Let them be, Jan! It's over!"

Some two minutes after Mortimer had first dived at Pearson's knees eight revolvers and several large knives were piled on the bar. Two or three of the beaten men were staggering to their feet. Danny Shay's face was bleeding and blood was streaming from Pearson's gashed head, his mouth agape with shock, and twisted with pain.

Jan Erickson strode back and forth frenziedly shouting:

"That's what a Mortimer does. He cuts through bums like you the way a knife cuts through cheese! Why don't he wring your necks? Because he's ashamed to hurt wet-nosed kids!"

"Get out of the place, Jan," commanded Mortimer. "All of you get out!" He turned and said to Porson, "I'll pay half the cost of that mirror."

His voice did not penetrate Rip Porson's hazy trance as he continued to stare into space and wag his head slowly repeating:

"Fourteen wearin' pants and not one man among 'em. The world has gone to hell! Fourteen milk-fed baboons!"

There had to be a few rounds of drinks in another place to celebrate the victory. There had to be some patching of cuts. So it was two hours before Mortimer rounded up his crew and led them back to the Tumbling H, where

the three men who had missed the fight went into agonies because they had been out of it.

"Shut your faces," ordered Erickson. "There wouldn't of *been* no fight if you'd all been there. They wouldn't of dared! But the sweet spot you missed was the chief taking a dive into 'em like into a swimmin' pool. And the waves he throwed up took all the fight out of 'em."

When they were in the barracks shed, Pudge Major sat with his head in his hands. Mortimer patted him on the back.

"I was yella," groaned Pudge. "The whole world knows I'm yella."

"You needed a sock on the chin before you got your second wind," declared Mortimer. "Then you were the best man in the room. Ask the boys. Even Jan wouldn't take you on. Would you, Jan?"

"Him?" said Jan. "I'd rather take on a wildcat!"

"Jan, d'you mean that, partly?" asked Pudge.

"I mean the whole of it," said Jan. "And when it comes to workin' with a chair, you're way out by yourself."

Mortimer left them in this humor and drove over to the Cross M in the light truck. A Chinese servant opened the door, and at that moment John Miller came down the hall with a jangle of spurs and a quirt in his hand. His daughter was following him. He stood stiffly erect looking at Mortimer without a word.

"I imagine you've heard about the trouble in Poplar Springs," said Mortimer. "I want to tell you I didn't send out my men to make trouble. They went off by themselves, and I went after them to bring them back. When I found them, they'd located your boys already. I tried to stop the fight, but it got under way in spite of me."

"Are you through?" asked John Miller, parting his locked jaws with difficulty.

"If any reprisals start," Mortimer said slowly, "it will be on your part, not mine. I've taken my beating and I haven't yipped. But if your hands try to make more trouble there'll be killing. Can you keep your men in hand?"

"Are you finished?" repeated Miller.

"I am," said Mortimer.

"Very well," said Miller, and walked straight past him.

HE TURNED his bewildered eyes on Louise as she started to go past him behind her father. She was pale, and shadows were about her eyes. His look was puzzled as she stood looking steadily into his face.

"I wasn't hard to get, was I?" she asked. "You only had to whistle and the bird flew right off the tree to your hand."

"What are you saying, Lou?" he asked.

She looked down at his pleading hand, then up to his face, in which was pain, and she laughed a little.

"You *are* wonderful, Harry," she said. "It's that honest, straightforward simplicity which gets you so far. And your voice. That does a lot. The facial expression, too. Hollywood could make a star of you. The way it is now, I suppose you hardly make pocket money out of the girls. Or do they run high, sometimes—the bets you place before you go out to make a girl?"

"Hancock—he must have said—Lou I didn't know I'd adore you as I do!"

"You know now, though, don't you?" she said. "You love me all your heart can hold, Harry, don't you?"

He tried to answer her, but felt the words die on his lips.

"And d'you know, Harry," she went on, "I think it was the beginning of a great love. As I went along beside you through the night, I would have given both hands for you. I would have given my heart, and—aren't you a rather yellow sort of dog, Harry?"

She went quickly by him with her quick, light, graceful step. And as she vanished through the patio gate, sud-

denly the whole world seemed as gray as the swiftly moving gray stream that poured across the sky endlessly, as it had been pouring ever since morning. The sun was small and green behind it.

He got back into the truck and drove blindly toward the ranch. Subconsciously his mind took note of the sweep of mist through the sky and the color of the setting sun behind it. No water vapor could give that color. It was dust —dust rushing headlong on the higher stratum of the air. Somewhere the wind had eaten through the skin of the range and was scattering uncounted tons of topsoil into nothingness.

That should have meant much to Harry Mortimer, but his mind refused to take heed of it. Only the thought of Louise Miller was clear in his consciousness. Then a vision of Charles Hancock rose up to taunt him. He gripped the wheel so hard it trembled under his grasp.

IX

WHEN Mortimer brought the car up before the ranchhouse entrance, three or four of Hancock's personal punchers were lounging in the doorway. He shouldered brusquely past them, and went on into the living room, where as usual Hancock lay on the couch with his rum-punch fixings on the table beside him. As Mortimer entered, he smote his paunch a resounding whack.

"Ah, Harry!" he cried. "You're the one soul in the world I want to see. I don't mean about battering some of the Miller boys in Poplar Springs. That'll do your reputation on the range some good, though. Tackling guns with bare hands is rather a novelty in this part of the world, of course—but what's that to me? Do you know what *has* meaning for me, Harry?"

"What makes a difference to you, Charles?" Mortimer asked and his eyes bored into Hancock as though he were striking home a knife.

But a wave of thought had overcome Hancock, dimmed his eyes.

"I'm going to tell you something, my lad," he said. "About a woman. Mind you, Harry, I want you to understand *the* woman. Years ago, but rare. Something too beautiful to last."

"I follow you," Mortimer said.

The rancher had almost closed his eyes as he consulted the picture from his past. "I adored her. I asked her to marry me. When she accepted me, Harry, the sound of her voice lifted me almost out of my boots. But when I was about to take the prize in my hand, Harry—mark this—she disappeared. Vanished absolutely. The way you say this range soil will vanish when the wind hits it right. What took her away? A little wizened son of a French marquis with no more man in him than there is skin on the heel of my hand. She was lost to me. Love. Hope. What the hell will you have?

"And since that day I've lain here with the rum bottle wondering how the devil I could get back at the whole female sex. Can't do anything with them when you lie flat and simply think, so I had to wait until you did it for me. D'you see? You showed me how women can be handled as easily as they handle men. Last night I saw another woman's eyes melt when your name was mentioned. I saw the whole lovesick story in her face. And as a result of one evening's work. Why, Harry, when I saw what you had done, I wanted to beg you for lessons."

"So you told her everything, didn't you?" asked Mortimer.

Hancock took another moment for thought. At the same moment the wind seemed to descend and grip the ranchhouse with a firmer hand. The whine of the storm ascended the scale by several notes.

"I don't think I told her anything," said Hancock. "I could only lie here and laugh. And admire you, Harry—how you'd paid off my score. I felt a deathless debt—gratitude, and all that.

Wonderful feeling, Harry. The first time I've had it in my life. Absolutely extraordinary."

"Undoubtedly," muttered Mortimer.

"And that's why I'm glad to see you today," said Hancock. "Not because you've beaten eight of Miller's best men with your hands, but because you've subdued one woman, opened her heart, put tears in her eyes, made her tremble, when you didn't give a hang for her from first to last."

He broke into a gigantic peal of laughter which wound up on a gasping and sputtering.

"Close, in here," he said. "Cool, but close. That's strange, isn't it?"

Mortimer could not speak, seeing again the beauty and the pride of the girl who was lost to him through the evil in this man.

"Chuck the door open, like a good fellow, will you?" asked Hancock. "I've never had so much trouble breathing. Is the alcohol getting me at last? Well, let it. I'll die laughing. I've seen the proud, unapproachable female paid off for me, shot for shot. And I owe that to you, old fellow. Mortimer, I'll love you as long as I last!"

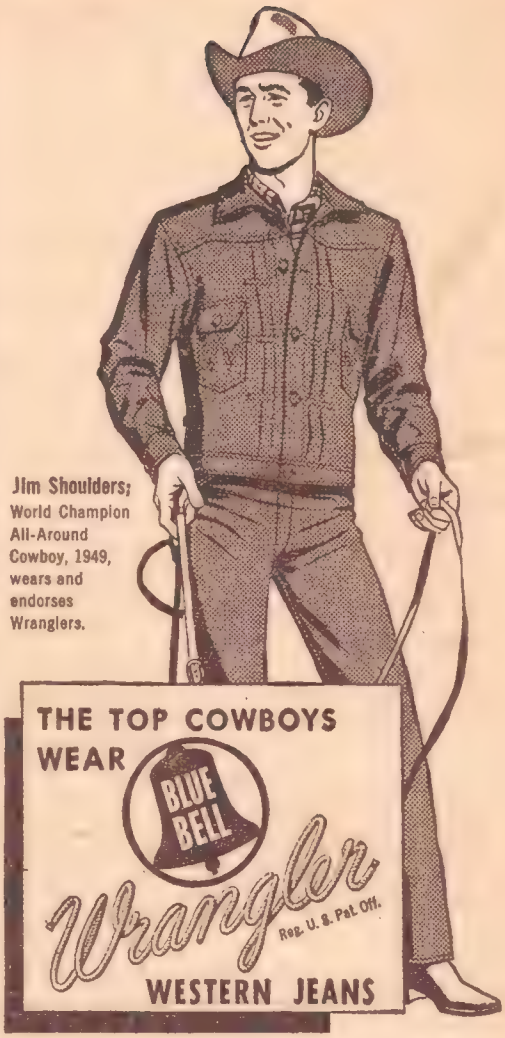
Mortimer went to the door and threw it wide. It seemed to him that ghosts rushed up into the lamplight, into his face. Then it was as though dim horses were galloping past in endless procession, and swifter than horses ever put hoof to the ground. He squinted into the dimness before he could understand that the swift whirl was a dust storm rushing past him at full speed.

The range was melting away before his eyes!

FLYING dust enveloped Mortimer and set him coughing as he closed the door and turned back into the room.

Hancock was grinning cheerfully. "There she blows, Harry," he said. "There's the dust storm you've been talking about. Now we'll see if you've buttoned the topsail down with all your

[*Turn page*]



Many other Rodeo Cowboys Association champions wear Wranglers, including:

Todd Whatley, All-Around World Champion, 1947
Gerald Roberts, All-Around World Champ., 1948
Casey Tibbs, World Saddle Bronc Rid. Champ., '49
Bill Linderman, Runner-up World Champion, 1949

BLUE BELL WRANGLERS are tough and rugged. Made of heaviest 11-oz. Sanforized denim. Won't shrink out of fit. Styled by Rodeo Ben, custom tailor to top cowboys and ranchers. Men's and boys' sizes — **zipper or button front.** Women's Wranglers, 8 oz. wt., for trim figures, sizes 12 through 20. *Each* garment in Blue Bell's complete line of work and play clothes is guaranteed the best made, best fitting you can buy—*or your money back!*

BLUE BELL, Inc., Greensboro, N. C.
WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

plantings and plowings. Now we'll see if the range *has* been overgrazed, and what part of it is going to blow away."

"That dust is blowing from far away," said Mortimer. "There isn't enough edge to this wind to tear up the ground here badly."

The house trembled, as though nudged by an enormous shoulder, and the storm screamed an octave higher. Mortimer pulled out a bandana and began to knot it around his throat.

"Get your hand-picked punchers on the job, Charlie," he suggested.

"It's dark, brother," said Hancock, "and the kind of lads I hire don't work in the night."

"All right," said Mortimer. "The cattle I save will be my share of the stock, and the dead ones can belong to you."

He left the room, with Hancock loudly protesting, but agreeing to order his men out.

When Mortimer stepped into the open the gale was blowing hard enough to set his eyelids trembling. It came at him like a river of darkness. He bumped the corner of the house, turning toward the barracks shed, then the wind caught him from the side and set him staggering.

The light in the window of the shed was a dull, greenish blur. He had to fumble to find the door, and he pressed his way in, to find a jingling of pots and pans in the kitchen and men sneezing and cursing in the mist which filtered rapidly through the cracks in the walls.

"It's the dust storm, boys," he said. "Pulled at my feet like water. No man has to go out into weather like this, but if any of you volunteer to give a hand—"

Jan Erickson turned his head to survey the group. "Leave me see the man that won't volunteer," he said ominously.

But not one of them hung back. Content filled Mortimer's heart.

Shorty appeared in the kitchen door, shouting: "There's goin' to be plenty grit in the flour bin and mud in the coffee, Chief!"

A louder howling of the wind seemed to answer him directly and set the men to laughing. They equipped themselves as Mortimer directed, with shirts buttoned close at neck and wrist to keep out the flying sand, and with bandanas ready to pull up over mouth and nose. A big canteen to each should give enough water to wash the mouth clean for a few hours and keep the bandana wet in case it became necessary to strain the dust out more thoroughly.

Four of them would ride with Charlie Hancock's cowpunchers to help handle the cattle, which probably were drifting rapidly before the storm and lodging helpless against the fence lines. The thing to do was to get the weakest of the livestock into the barns and round up the others in the valley, where Mortimer's grove of young trees would give some shelter against the whip of the wind and the drifting of the soil. This work was properly that of range riders, but under Mortimer the CCC men had learned every detail of ranch work.

They went out with him and worked all night.

The wind kept coming out of the northwest like a thousand devils, so Mortimer led a group of the men into the southeast, at the farthest limit of the Hancock range. They found two hundred steers drifted against a barbed wire fence, with their heads down and the drift sand already piled knee-deep around them. There they would remain unless rescued, until the sand heaped over them in a great dune. It required hard work to turn the herd, shooting guns in their faces, shouting and flogging, but at last the cattle began to move back toward the Chappany Valley.

Streaks and slitherings of moonlight showed the cattle continually drifting aslant, to turn their faces from the storm. It was like riding into a sandblast. Fine silt had forced its way un-

der tight wristbands and down collars, so that a crawling discomfort possessed their bodies. Dust was thick on every tongue, and there was a horrible sense of the lungs filling, so that breathing was labored.

WHEN they had jammed those steers into the valley, letting them drink at the lowest of the two Tumbling H lakes, they pushed the herd into one of the groves of trees which Mortimer had planted two years before. The slant of the ground gave some protection. By their multitude the spindling trees afforded a fence which seemed to filter the air somewhat cleaner.

That push against the dusty wind had been almost too much for some of the cattle. Many of them slumped to their knees. The others, wandering, lowing and bellowing, pooled up around the steers that went down, and presently the entire herd was holding well. But some of those that went down would be dead before morning.

It was not a time to count losses, however. It was like riding out a storm in an old, cranky and helpless ship. The cargo did not matter. Life was the thing to consider.

Mortimer washed out his nose and throat and moistened the bandana which covered the lower part of his face. He sent his riders back to find more fence-lodged cattle and aimed his own tough cow pony straight up the valley toward Miller's thousand acres of plowed ground. Heading into the wind, it was impossible to keep his eyes open for long at a time. No matter how narrowly he squinted, the fine silt blew through his lashes and tormented his eyeballs.

He came up on the northern edge of the two square miles of that plowed and hay-covered cropland and found his mustang stepping on hard, smooth ground. His flashlight showed that the border acres which edged toward the wind had blown away like a dream. Reddish hardpan, tough as burned bricks, was all that remained!

He dismounted, tried to clear his throat, and found that the choke of the dust storm had penetrated to the bottom of his lungs like thick smoke. Panic stormed up in his brain, but he beat it down and went on about his observations. There were things to see here which should be reported in minute detail to the Government.

It was a dark moment of the storm, for the wind came on with a scream and a steel-edge whistling through the hay, and the moon was shut away almost entirely. It showed only in vague tumblings and shapeless rollings of dust that seemed to spill more loosely across the heavens than mere clouds ever do. Sometimes it was as though the earth had exploded and the results were hanging motionless in the air.

But what Mortimer wanted to see was closer at hand.

X

QUICKLY Mortimer went over the bared ground to the rim of the hay still standing. In places it was rolled back and heaped like matting; sometimes it had piled up in cone-shaped masses like shocked hay, but every now and then the wind got its finger-tips under the shocks and blew them to smithereens with a single breath.

On his knees Mortimer turned the flashlight on the edge of the hay land and watched the action of the storm. At that point the life-sustaining humus was about a foot deep to the hardpan. The top portion, which had been loosened by the plow, ran down from four to six inches, and this part gave way rapidly, sifting from around the white roots of the hay until each stalk was suddenly jerked away.

The scouring blast worked more gradually at the lower unplowed layer of the soil, which was compacted with the fine, hairlike roots of range grass. But even this gave way with amazing rapidity.

The hay land was doomed. An army could not have saved it.

As Harry Mortimer mounted, the swinging ray of the electric torch showed him another horseman who sat his saddle not far away. The long-legged horse kept nervously making small bucking movements of protest, but the rider held it impassively.

Coming nearer, Mortimer saw the masked face and the sand-reddened eyes of John Miller, who was watching twelve thousand dollars' worth of hay and fifty thousand dollars' worth of irreplacable topsoil blow to hell. Silently the rancher stared at the swift destruction. Mortimer rode to his side. "Sorry, Miller!" he shouted.

John Miller gave him a glance, then resumed his study of the growing ruin. Mortimer turned back to the valley.

He passed over a long stretch of Cross M bottom land which had been plowed for onions and potatoes. The deep, black soil was dissolving under the breath of the storm.

Mortimer groaned. That heavy loam had formed centuries or hundreds of centuries before among the roots of the forested uplands. Rain had washed it gradually into the rivers. Chappany floods had spread it over the valley. And this rich impost which nature had spread in ten thousand careful layers was blowing away forever!

IT SEEMED to Mortimer that all America was vanishing from beneath his feet.

He hurried on, looking anxiously toward a flickering line of lanterns that shone from the high ground above the Cross M lakes. He had warned John Miller, by word and by example, about the danger of those rolling sand dunes above the bluff. If a great wind came from this quarter, the whole mass of sand might spill over the edge of the bluff to fill the lakes and sponge up the priceless water. Then the wind came down the Chappany Valley, and the lanterns were dimmed.

Out of the sweeping dimness, which blew his horse sliding, he came back onto Hancock range and dismounted. With his flashlight he studied half a mile of terrain. Some contour plowing was commencing to blow a little, but his trees, his stretches of shrubbery over exposed shoulders, and the tough grasses with wide-spreading roots which he had planted were buttoning the soil to the hardpan, holding the ground like a green overcoat.

One burst of triumph filled his throat, but the joy slipped away and left his heart cold. For somehow his soul had struck roots in the whole countryside. Now hundreds of thousands of good acres all over the range were threatened, and it seemed to Mortimer that not only his hopes, but his whole planned future were imperiled.

He turned his horse up to where the bluff diminished to a reasonable slope. The headlights of an automobile came bucking through the dimness. A great truck went by, roaring, with a load of long timbers.

Mortimer's heart sank, for he knew the meaning of that. He spurred the mustang on behind the truck until he reached the sand dunes immediately above the two lakes which belonged on Tumbling H land and held water for Hancock cattle.

The sand which came on the whistling wind up there cut at the skin and endangered the eyes, but his flashlight showed him no portion of the Tumbling H dunes wearing under the storm! From the edge of the bluff and back for a hundred yards, he had planted a tough Scotch shrub which had the look of heather, though it never bloomed. For fuel it was useless.

No cattle would graze on those bitter, varnished leaves. For that shrubbery served no purpose except to shield the ground under it. It grew not more than a foot high, but spread in such solid masses that wind could not get at its roots.

BEHIND the shrubbery he had planted fifty rows of tough saplings, close as a fence. They had grown slowly, but the thickened trunks stood up now against the storm like solidly built palings.

Beyond them, and stretching as far as the dunes rolled, Mortimer had covered every inch of the ground with a grass from the Russian steppes, where eight months of the year the earth is frozen, and where for four months this close-growing, stubborn grass covers the soil like a blanket of a fine weave and offers a steady pasturage for wandering herds.

For two years it had been rooting and spreading, and now it clothed the dunes behind the Tumbling H lakes with an impermeable vesture. The dunes themselves had been anchored here, but flying silt was banking up outside the farther lines of his fence of saplings. If the storm continued for days it might gradually heap the sand so high the trees would be overwhelmed, but little of the sand could roll over the bluff and drop into the lakes.

Once more triumph rioted through Mortimer's blood. And once more the triumph died as he looked at the flickering lanterns along the edge of the bluff. As he rode closer, he found two hundred men laboring in a mist of blow-sand. Yelled orders sang on the wind and vanished. Here and there men were down on their knees, as they tried to cough the dust out of their lungs.

Of course, the Cross M Ranch could not supply such a force of working hands as this. The men were from all over range. For the first sweep of the storm had choked a thousand pools with silt and had begun to damage the water in many a standing tank. The small ranchers had turned naturally to John Miller, but when they telephoned the ominous answer had been that the dunes were crawling toward the edge of the bluff above the lakes which served not only Miller's cattle during the dry season, but the herds of his neighbors.

That news had brought men swiftly. Cross M trucks carried timbers to the bluff. And the entire army was slaving to erect a fence that would halt the slow drift of the dunes. To fence off the whole length of the three lakes was impossible, so they selected the largest of the three, the one just above the Tumbling H line, and a double fence line was being run.

John Miller appeared on the scene riding up and down, giving advice, snapping orders like a resolute general in the midst of a battle, but this was a losing fight. For the whole sweep of the dunes was rising up in a smother of blow-sand, heaping loosely spilling masses on the ridges, so that there was a constantly forward flow as though of incredibly reluctant waves.

The men worked with sullen, patient endurance, scooping out footholds for the posts, boarding them across, with interstices between the boards, then supporting the shaky structure against the sweep of wind and the roll of sand with long, angled shorings.

A woman moved up and down the line with a bucket of water and a sponge. As she came near, the workers raised the handkerchiefs which covered nose and mouth. Some stood with open mouth and tongue thrust out to receive the quick swabbing that enabled them to breathe again.

Mortimer saw then that the woman was Louise Miller, though she, too, was masked. He swung down from his horse and laid hold of the bail of the bucket she carried.

"I'll handle this heavy job, Lou," he told her.

Weariness had unsteadied her, and the wind staggered her heavily against him. For an instant, she leaned against him. Then she pulled up the bandana covering her face.

"It's a great day for you!" she choked. "We laughed at you, did we? We wouldn't listen to you! Well, it's

the dirt doctor's turn to laugh now while the whole range blows away from under our feet."

He picked up the sponge from the soupy water of the pail and swabbed the sand and black muck from her face. He steadied her against the wind with one hand.

"We're learning our lesson," she taunted. "If the wind leaves us anything, we'll beg you to teach us how to keep it."

He passed the sponge over her face again slowly. "You're talking like a spoiled little fool," he said.

"Get off our range and stay off!" she answered. "We'd rather let the wind blow us to hell than have you lift a hand to help us!"

She caught up the pail and went on swiftly, though the sand blew from about her feet as they lifted from the shifting ground.

JOHN MILLER came up, fighting his horse into the wind. A kneeling, coughing man jumped up suddenly from the ground and gripped Miller's reins. With his other hand he gestured wildly toward Mortimer.

"You wouldn't listen to him!" he screamed. "You laughed at him. You knew everything! He was only a fool tenderfoot. And all the sense was given to the Millers! But look at the Tumbling H, look at the safe water, and then look at *you*! Damn you for a fool!"

He dropped to the ground again, and began trying once more to cough the dust from his lungs.

Miller rode up to Mortimer. "You've got three men working with us here," he said. "Take them away. We don't need their hands. We don't need your brains. Get off the Cross M range!"

Mortimer turned without a word, letting his horse drift before the wind. He found Lefty Parkman and gave him the order to leave, with the other two men. And as they all trooped back toward home Mortimer took grim notice of how the first sand fence was already sagging under the irresistible weight of accumulating silt.

But the storm and the fate of the range had become less important to him. It was not the blow-sand that kept him from drawing breath, but the fine, poisonous dust of grief, after that meeting with Lou.

Then the thought of how Hancock, the fat drunkard, had betrayed him blinded him with anger. He drove the snorting mustang as fast as he could to the ranchhouse. The thickest smother of the storm was around him as he broke in through the hall door.

As he turned into the living room he heard Hancock singing cheerfully over his rum punch.

"Hi, Harry!" called Hancock. "How's the little sand-blow? Been a hero again, old boy?"

The rage that had been building in Mortimer sank away to a dumb disgust.

Then the telephone began to purr.

"For you," said Hancock. "The thing has been ringing all night. The world seems to want Harry Mortimer, after forgetting him these two years."

"Mortimer?" a strident, nasal voice said over the wire. "This is Luke Waterson over in Patchen Valley. The wind's blowing hell out of things over here. Barn's gone down, slam! Forty head inside it. Mortimer, I don't care about barns and cattle, but the ground's whipping away from under our feet! You claim you can keep the ground buttoned down tight. For God's sake tell us what to do! We'll all pitch in and wear our hands to the bone if you'll tell me how to start."

"Waterson," Mortimer said, "it makes my heart ache to hear you. God knows I'd help you if I could. But the only way to anchor the topsoil is to use time as well as thought and—"

"You mean you won't tell me the answer?" shouted Waterson.

"There's no answer I can give when—" He heard the receiver slammed up at the other end.

As he turned away from the phone, it rang again with a long clamor.

"This is Tom Knight," said another voice. "Down at Pokerville. Mortimer, I've always believed you knew your business. The devil is to pay down here. Sand and silt in all three of our tanks. No water. And three hundred acres I've got in winter wheat is blowing into the sky! Mortimer, what can I do to hold the soil? It's going through my fingers like water through a sieve!"

"I can't tell you, Mr. Knight," said Mortimer. "You need two years of careful planting, and less crowding on the cattle range."

"Two years? Hell, man, I'm talking about hours, not years! In twenty-four hours there won't be enough grass on my lands to feed a frog! Can you tell me what to do?"

"Not even Providence could help your land till the wind stops blowing, Mr. Knight."

"Damn you and your books and your theories then!" roared Knight, and his receiver crashed on the hook..

The instrument was hardly in place when the bell rang again.

"Take it, Charlie, will you?" asked Mortimer weakly.

"I'll take it," said Hancock. "*I'll* tell 'em."

Presently he was shouting into the mouthpiece: "—and even if he were here I wouldn't let him waste time on you. For two years he's been trying to show you the way. You knew too much to listen. Stay where you are and choke with dust, or come up here and see how Tumbling H acres are sticking fast to the hardpan!"

He laughed and hung up.

"That's the way to talk to 'em," he said. "You're in the saddle now. Let 'em taste the spur. Ram it into 'em and give the rowels a twist. I wish I had 'em where *you* have 'em. They've sneered at drunken Charlie Hancock all these years. I'd make 'em dizzy if I had the chance, now. I'd tell 'em how to—"

XI

SOMEHOW Mortimer escaped from Charlie Hancock's tirade. He wondered at the hollowness in his heart, and at the pain, which was like homesickness. And the thought of Louise was uppermost—the firm set of her lips as she had denounced him.

For forty-eight hours he worked without closing his eyes. Even Jan Erickson broke before that and lay on the floor on his back, a snoring sound in his throat though his eyes were wide open. Pudge Major's throat and face swelled. He lay propped up in the only position in which he could breathe.

Mortimer gave the Chinese twenty dollars to spend every spare moment at Pudge's bedside. He, himself, had to be outside.

In the middle of the second day of that unrelenting wind, the last defense on top of the bluff gave way and the sand began to flood down into the third of the Cross M lakes. The first two had choked up within twenty-four hours of the start of the blow. The flowing sand quickly overwhelmed the third. In the thick, horrible dusk cattle, mad with thirst, were thrusting their muzzles deep into the wet ooze, stifling, dying in the muck.

When Mortimer dropped by to look in on poor Pudge Major, Wang came racing from the house with incredible speed.

He announced that John Miller was in the ranchhouse. Mortimer went there instantly and into the living room. Hancock was there, with his face swollen and rum-reddened, and Miller, a good ten years older, sat with a steaming glass of punch in his hand.

"He wants help," said Hancock, his exultation at this surrender of his old enemy plain in his voice. "I have the vote on this ranch, with my two-thirds interest, but I want your opinion, Mortimer. Shall we let Miller's cattle water in our lakes? Shall we charge 'em a dollar a head, or is it safe to let

them use up our reserve supply at any price?"

The rancher took these humiliating blows with an unmoved face.

"It is true," he said, "that I am on my knees. I'm begging for water, Mr. Mortimer. Will I get it?"

"You want it for your own cattle, and for those of your friends?" said Mortimer.

"Too many," said Hancock, shaking his head. "Can't do it."

"I would be ashamed to get water for my own cattle and not the herds of my neighbors," said Miller. "Some of us have lived on the range like brothers for generations."

"I'm not of that brotherhood, Miller," snapped Hancock. "Can't water the cows of every man under the sky. Can't, and won't. There isn't enough in my lakes."

"I put six feet on each of our dams last year," said Mortimer.

"There's still not enough to—"

"There's enough water there for the whole cmmunity," Mortimer broke in.

"If they get water, they'll pay for it!" declared Hancock. "Business is the word between us, Miller. Do you remember five years ago when I wanted to run a road across that southeastern corner of your place?"

"I was not on the place when my foreman refused you," said Miller.

"Why didn't you change his mind for him when you got back then?" demanded Hancock.

"You didn't ask a second time," said the old rancher.

"Oh, you thought I'd crawl to you, did you?" growled Hancock. "It doesn't run in the Hancock blood to come crawling. Now I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let your cows come to my water, but they'll pay a dollar a head for each day spent beside the lakes. Understand?"

Miller's lips pinched hard together.

"This drought may last two weeks, a month," said Mortimer, "before the water-holes are cleaned out and before trenches catch the seepage from the choked lakes. The people around here won't pay thirty dollars a cow to water them for a month."

"They won't?" said Hancock. "They *won't?* I want to see them get one drop of water without handing me cash for it!"

MILLER took a deep breath and replaced his untasted drink on the table.

"I think you know what this means, Hancock," he said. "There are some impatient men waiting at my house now. When I tell them what you have to say, they're apt to come and get the water they need, in spite of you."

"My dear Miller," said Hancock suavely, "I occasionally have a glass, but my hand is still steady." He held out his glass. The liquid in it was as steady as a painted color inside it. "And my rifle remains my good friend. When you and your friends come over, you can have water or blood, or both. But for the water you'll pay."

Miller looked him over carefully for a moment. Then he turned and left in silence.

Hancock threw up a fist and shook it at the ceiling.

"Did you hear me, Harry?" he demanded. "Did I tell it to him? I've waited fifteen years to show the range I'm a man, and now they're beginning to find it out! Harry, hell is going to pop, and I'll be in the middle of it! Not a rum-stew, but a man-sized hell of my own making!"

Argument would have been, of all follies, the most complete. Mortimer sat silently watching Hancock as Charlie pulled on riding clothes. A heavy cartridge belt slanted around the man's hips, with a big automatic weighing it down. He downed a sombrero and pulled a chin band down to keep it firmly in place. Then he picked up his repeating rifle, and laughed.

A siren began to sound above the house. That signal would bring back to

the ranchhouse those fighting cowhands of whom Hancock was so proud and who owed their existence out of jail to his generosity and carelessness of their bad records. That siren, cutting through the whirl of the wind, would tell its story to John Miller as he rode back to his ranch. And Mortimer knew what a cleaning of guns and gathering of ammunition would reply to it.

"Harry," he heard Hancock saying, "it's all owing to you. I've had mental indigestion too much of my life because a girl smacked me down. Except for you there'd be choked lakes for the Tumbling H as well as the Cross M. But because you have been so diligent, I have the bone that the dog will jump for and I'm going to hold it high!"

"Quit it, Charlie, will you?" growled Mortimer. "You're not showing yourself a man. You're a button in a tantrum."

"Before this button gets through squalling," said Hancock, "a lot of big, strong men on this range are going to wish I'd never been born. Before—"

A knock came on the front door. It was pushed open, and a slight figure staggered into the hallway in a whirl of dust and looked into the living room. Louise Miller! With her eyes windbleared, and weariness making her walk with a shambling step, she should not have been worth a second glance. Instead, she seemed to Mortimer to have been made specially to fill his heart. Her eyes found him and she promptly forgot him.

"My father came to talk business, I know," she said to Hancock. "But he didn't get far, did he?"

"Not one step, Lou," said Hancock.

"I haven't come to talk business," she said. "I've come to beg."

"You?" said Hancock. "You're Miller's daughter. You can't beg."

"On my knees, if it will do any good," Lou said.

"Did *he* send you?" asked Hancock, with malicious curiosity.

"He doesn't know I'm here," she told him. "But if you'll give us a chance I'll let the whole world know the kindness that's in you, Charlie."

"Aw, quit that," said Hancock.

"Charlie, will you listen to me?" she pleaded.

He began to walk up and down and she followed him.

"They've always smacked me down," he complained. "By the eternal if they get anything out of me now, they'll have to fight for it!"

"Oh, it can't come to that!" urged Louise. She began to cry, and flung up a hand across her mouth to stifle her sobbing. "Don't think about the humans, Charlie, if you're so bitter! Think of the poor beasts! They're wedged against the fences. The sand is drifting them down. I shone a flashlight across ten thousand pairs of eyes of cattle that were dying! Charlie, are you listening to me?"

SHE pulled gently at his arm, but he was staring at the ceiling.

"You know something?" he said. "Back there before I turned into rumbloat and poison ivy, if you'd lifted a finger you wouldn't have had to ask. But I'm finished. I'm going to get one thing out of tonight, and that's a chance to die in a scrap."

"Don't say that!" she cried.

She stood on tiptoe, trying to look him in the eye, make him answer her pleading. But he kept his eyes on the ceiling.

"It's no good," he said. "Not if you were Sheba and Cleopatra. I'm cooked. But when they bury me they're going to know I was a man. Lou, get out! I won't talk any more."

"I've *got* to talk," she said. "If you go ahead, there'll be killing all over Chappany Valley!"

"Get out or I'll smack you down!" said Hancock, still looking at the ceiling.

It was agony to Mortimer to keep his hands off the man, but he forced

himself to realize that would help nothing. As Charlie boasted, he had the whip hand. Mortimer took Louise's arm, led her into the hall.

"You can't go home yet," he said. "You're as weak and wobbly as a new calf. You can't head off into this wind."

She leaned against him for a moment, silently gathering strength, then pushed away. Refusing to meet his eyes, she tottered to the front door. Mortimer put his hand on the knob.

"Look here," he said, "I'm not a hydrophobia skunk. You came here and let Hancock talk to you the other day. What he told you isn't the truth. Will you listen to me?"

"I'll go now," she muttered.

"I shouldn't let you go out and be choked in the dust," Mortimer said firmly.

"I'd rather be choked there than stay here," she flung at him. Staring straight before her she went on: "There wasn't any hatred in the Chappany Valley till you came." Her voice broke. "We all loved one another. We were happy!"

When he said nothing, she added, with sudden savagery:

"You don't belong here—any of you. Why didn't you stay away? Why don't you *go* away?"

Wordlessly he pulled the door open and took her outside. Her horse had crowded against the house, head down. He helped her into the saddle and saw both horse and girl reel as she swung off into the wind, and the darkness swallowed them.

XII

GRIM with determination, Mortimer went back into the house.

"Will you listen to me?" he asked Charles Hancock.

"I'll hear no arguments," said Hancock. "Now that I'm started I want what lies ahead. You can't turn me, brother!"

The fatigue which had been growing as a weight in Mortimer's brain gradually melted away and cold clear thought took its place.

"I think you mean business, Charlie," he said. "But do you think your father would approve? Would old Jim Hancock refuse water to the cows of his neighbors?"

"Jim Hancock is an old fool," said Charlie. "And he's fifteen miles away in Poplar Springs. Who's going to get to him to ask how he votes? The roads are wind-worn into badlands or drifted belly-deep in silt and sand. Nobody will get to him for a week or more. And the dance will be over before that."

"Do you know what it will mean?" asked Mortimer.

"I suppose it means *that*, to begin with," said Hancock, and cocked his head, listening.

Mortimer heard it, too, a long-drawn-out, organlike moaning, coming down the wind, as though all the stops of the organ had been opened, from the shrillest treble to the deepest bass. The lowing of thirst-stricken cattle milling beyond the fences of the Tumbling H, held from water.

Hancock smiled. "There it is," he said. "The mob's on the stage. They're calling to Oedipus. They're waiting for the main actor!" He laughed.

Mortimer struck him across the face with the flat of his hand. He hit with more force than he had intended, and Hancock staggered.

"Don't reach for that gun!" snapped Mortimer.

"No," said Hancock calmly. "I know you could break my back for me."

"I had to do something," said Mortimer. "Words weren't any good. I came out here on the range to do something the range didn't want. All I managed to accomplish was to put a prize in your hand that's worth a fight. You hear me, Hancock?"

"With an extreme and curious interest," said Charles Hancock.

"I'm not an expert shot—" Mortimer began.

"You have the making of an expert,

if you put your mind on it," said Hancock.

"Well, Charlie," said Mortimer, "if you kill a man attempting to get his cattle to your water, I'll come after you. You may put the first three bullets into me, but I'll kill you as surely as there's wind in the sky."

They eyed each other steadily.

"Is that all?" asked Hancock.

Mortimer didn't answer. He went out of the house and to the barracks.

"You stay here with Pudge," he said to Shorty. "As the rest of the boys come in, send them after me to the Cross M headquarters."

"Send them *where*?" shouted Shorty.

"To the Miller ranchhouse," said Mortimer, and went to the barn.

Mortimer did not take a horse from the saddle stock in the barn. Instead, he selected a ten-year-old Missouri mule, Chico, with a potbelly that meant as much to his endurance as the fat hump means to the camel. Chico had a lean, scrawny neck, a head as old as Methuselah's and filled with wicked wisdom, but four flawless legs and hoofs of iron.

With the mule saddled, Mortimer started the ride across Chappany Valley to the Cross M headquarters, bandana over nose and mouth against the whirling sand smother.

Darkness closed down when he was halfway across the valley, but with Chico knowing and holding to the trail, Mortimer was able to keep his eyes shut most of the way.

From time to time he opened them to squint at the drifted silt in the valley floor and the bare patches of good grass on Tumbling H land where he had planted the holding coverage to protect the soil.

Here and there acres had blown off like a thought, but the great mass of the soil had held firmly, because for two years, with a religious zeal, he had been covering the weak spots. Wherever he had worked, the victory went to him, but that was small consolation now. There would be blood on the land before long, and in some measure that was also his work.

BUT always, as he rode, the sense of irretrievable loss accompanied him, hollowness grew in his heart, and defeat. He had set out to act a lie, and though he had found it was not acting, but glorious truth, he knew that the girl he loved would never forgive him.

When he got to the Cross M he found automobiles and trucks parked everywhere, with sand drifted body-high around many of them. The patio entrance was three feet deep in drift.

When he tethered Chico to one of the old iron rings on posts that surrounded the court, he stood and listened to the wind, to the mourning of the cattle down the valley, and to angry voices inside the big house.

The uproar came from the big library. He went straight to it and stood on the threshold winking the grit from his eyes and looking over the crowd.

There were fifty men in the room, owners of ranches, and they meant business, swift, bitter. If Hancock used guns on these men he would not live long enough for Mortimer to get at him for retribution.

The noise ceased abruptly as Mortimer came into view. John Miller stalked across the room toward him.

"Mortimer," he said, "no man has ever been ordered to leave my house before, but in your case—"

"I'm tired of your pride," Mortimer said wearily. "I've come to see if I can stop killing. Will you listen to me?"

Miller was searching for some adequate answer when one man said:

"Let's be fair, Miller. He's a tenderfoot. But I've been over some of the Tumbling H range, and the land is holding like a rock. Who made it hold? This fellow did. Let's hear what he has to say. Maybe we have to learn the ABC's of ranching again."

"Gentlemen," Mortimer said, "a dollar a head a day is what Hancock means

to ask for every head of cattle that waters on our place, and I don't suppose you'll stand for it. If I throw in my third of that dollar, it cuts the price down to sixty-seven cents. I wonder if that will make a sufficient difference to you. Will you do business with Hancock on that basis?"

They were silent. Then John Miller said:

"I understand you donate your third of the spoils?"

"I donate it," said Mortimer.

"Suppose we call this emergency an act of God," Miller said, "and refuse to pay a penny for the surplus our neighbors may happen to have of what means life to all of us?"

"In that case," said Mortimer wearily, "I suppose I'm with you. I've left word for my men to follow me here. I've told Hancock that if he shoots to kill I'll kill him."

"I thought you said that you knew this fellow, Miller?" someone said loudly.

"I seem to be a fool, Ollie," Miller answered in a harsh, strained voice. "It's apparent I don't know anything."

"If you try to rush cattle down to the lakes," said Mortimer, "you'll find Charlie Hancock and his men waiting for you and every puncher he hires shoots straight. There are plenty of you to wipe them out, but there'll be men dead before the business ends. Another dozen hours won't kill many cattle that are waiting for water. Let me have that much time to get to Jim Hancock in Poplar Springs."

"You can't get through, Mortimer," John Miller protested with a bewildered face. "The trail's drifted knee-deep with sand in too many places. A horse couldn't live through fifteen miles of this dust storm, anyway."

"A mule could," said Mortimer.

"Even if you managed by luck to get to Poplar Springs," said Miller, "you couldn't get a thing from old Jim Hancock. He hates me and the rest of the ranchers around the valley. He don't give a hang for anything except a newspaper and checkers. He'd laugh in your face at the idea of a war in Chappany Valley. Mortimer, believe me, I appreciate your intention, but it's useless. You can't get to Poplar Springs, and if you could your trip would be for nothing."

"Look at these men," Mortimer said. "They're a determined lot. Unless you can hold them for a few hours, they'll rush Charlie Hancock's place with blazing rifles. If I can get to Jim Hancock, I'll bring him back with me."

THE housekeeper entered the room with a frightened face.

"Mr. Miller," she said, "I've been looking everywhere for Miss Louise. She's not in the house. She's not anywhere."

"Not in the house?" shouted Miller. "You mean she's out in this storm? Look in the attic. She always goes there in a storm!"

Mortimer did not hear their whispers. He was too full of his own plans to listen. Without waiting for further argument he went back into the patio, untied Chico, and rode through the entrance. Instantly the dust blast half blinded him, but he turned the mule across the sweep of the wind and headed toward Poplar Springs.

For the first three miles of his fifteen-mile ride he was able to breathe with comparative ease. The whole face of the country was sand-buried or sand-swept, although the trail was recognizable from time to time, not completely obliterated.

He had passed an abandoned cabin where the sand was heaped against the walls like shadows of brightness rather than dark when the storm came at him again like a herd of sky elephants, throwing up their trunks and trampling the earth to black smoke. It sounded as if the sky herd were all trumpeting together. Mortimer thought he had already seen the worst of the storm, but that black boiling was as thick as pitch.

He put his head down while Chico,

through that choking smother, found the uncovered spots in the disappearing trail with faultless instinct. It seemed to Mortimer that the land was like a living body, bleeding to death. The work of innumerable dead centuries was rushing about him like a nightmare.

Then Chico stumbled on something soft, and shied. Mortimer turned the shaft of his pocket torch down through the murk and saw the body of a horse on the ground. It was Hampton. He knew the mount by the distinctive streak of white on the forehead.

He dismounted. Sand had almost buried the dead horse, but the tail blew out along the wind with an eerie imitation of life. Sand filled the dead eyes. The left foreleg was broken below the knee. There was a round bullet-hole above the temple that had brought quick death to the thoroughbred.

Instantly he guessed what had happened. Without her father's knowledge, Lou had headed for town, perhaps hoping to bring the law to restore peace to Chappany Valley! She had stripped saddle and bridle from Hampton. That meant she was somewhere not far away, with the storm overwhelming her! The saddle would give her a bit of shelter and be a shield behind which she could breathe.

XIII

NARROWING his eyes to thin slits, Harry Mortimer held up his hands to turn the immediate edge of the wind, but in the darkness he could see nothing as he rode the mule in circles around the dead horse. The flashlight he held was like a lance shaft, a brittle thing that elongated or broke off short according to the density of the storm that swept around him. Turning into the wind was like going up a steep hill. Turning away from it was like lurching down a slope.

Anxiously he kept on looking for some sign of Louise. But now his eyes were so filled with fine silt that he saw only splinterings and watery breakings of the torchlight. Then a ghost stepped into the patch of light—Louise!

The wind whipped her hair into a ragged fluttering about her face, and she came on with one hand held out, feeling her way. She thought Mortimer was Sam Pearson as she stumbled toward the light.

"Sam!" she cried. "Oh dear old Sam! I knew you would come! But I thought —never could find—"

The wind blew her words to tatters. Weeping had further reddened her eyes.

"Hampton—beautiful—gone—" she was moaning.

The wind thrust her into Mortimer's arms. As she clung to him he turned his body to make a windbreak for her. The flying sand pricked his skin with a million needle points. Sometimes the drift came bucketing at him out of scoop shovels with a force that staggered him on his planted feet. He had to hold up the girl, too, in this wild deluge of sand, in this ending of the world.

"I would have gone crazy with fear," she said, "but I kept on holding to the thought that you would come, Sam."

He knew he should tell her at once that he was not Sam Pearson, but he could not. He was stealing this moment out of her life, giving him inexpressible happiness in spite of the peril. The flashlight showed the dust leaping past them to the scream of the wind.

"If Father had guessed where I had gone," she said, "he would simply have gone plunging out and been lost. But I thought of you, Sam, and I knew you wouldn't want to waste all the time you've put in teaching me things. And I knew you'd find me—"

"Louise!" said Mortimer.

As her body stiffened, he knew that it was with shock and horror. He turned the light so that it struck upon their faces. No, it was not horror that he saw, but a profound wonder.

"*You* came for me?" she said.

He wanted to hold her closer, tell her he could have found her in the steam of hell because instinct would always show him the way. But he couldn't say that. He had to be honest, like a damned fool.

"*You* came for me?" she asked again.

"Partly for you," said Mortimer.

All at once she was a thousand miles away from him, though she had merely taken one step backward.

"Chico will pull us through," said Mortimer, and helped her up into the saddle. He should have said something else. He should have made some gallant protestation. Now she would be despising him more than ever for a stupid, grotesque fool, or as someone who saved her life not for love, but from a sheer sense of duty. He had lost his chance, and it would never come again.

Through the whirling dust storm, Chico clung to the trail by instinct. Mortimer clung to a stirrup leather and floundered on, praying that his knees would not give way.

When the sand and flying silt Chico breathed had choked the wise old mule, he halted, with his head down. Then Mortimer would swab out the animal's nostrils and wash out his mouth. As he worked, the light from the pocket flashlight showed him the wind-bleared face of the girl. She seemed like a body adrift in the sea. Worlds apart from him, yet more desirable than ever.

It was not always thick darkness. Sometimes the sky cleared a little, as long rents tore through the whirling explosions of dust. As the gray of day came on they saw the immensity of the clouds that rolled through the upper heavens and dragged their skirts along the ground.

THEY had gone on for hours when Mortimer, floundering through a darker bit of dust twilight, jostled heavily against Chico. Louise halted the mule and dropped to the ground, handing the reins to Mortimer. He was staggering with weariness, but this seemed to him an insulting challenge to his manhood. He picked her up and pitched her back into the saddle. A sweep of the flashlight showed her saying angry words, but the wind blotted them out.

When they went on again, with all his anger gone, he could see that it had been merely a friendly gesture on her part, but he had not understood. For he had been as drunk with fatigue as he was heartsick now.

An age of desperate struggle followed, with his knees turning to water under his weight. Then he heard her cry out something against the wind. He saw her pointing. Then he was able to see, though blurred and dim, Poplar Springs immediately before them!

In moments they reached the town, were approaching a light, and a door was opening. Then they were under shelter, knowing only a heavenly peace, out of the storm with its screaming voice shut out.

Mortimer lay on his back on the floor, coughing up black mud and choking. A boy swabbed off his face.

"Your eyes look terrible," the boy was saying. "Don't it hurt even to wink?"

"Get that mule into shelter and water him, will you?" Mortimer asked huskily.

"He's fixed up already," answered the lad.

Mortimer groaned and stretched. The great fatigue was shuddering out of his body. He closed his eyes. There were still a thousand things to be done. This was the rest between rounds. The hardest part of the fight was yet to come.

"They're from the Chappany!" he heard a woman's voice cry out from another room. "They've come clear down from Chappany Valley! This is Louise Miller!"

Someone leaped across the room to Mortimer. He opened his burning eyes

and saw a gray-haired man leaning over him.

"You didn't come down the Chappany, did you?" he shouted. "You come down the valley through all that hell?"

"We came down the Chappany," said Mortimer.

"Bud," the gray-haired man said to the boy, "run get Mr. Sloan and Pop Enderby and Jiggs Dawson and tell 'em they're goin' to hear what's happenin' in the valley. If it's blowin' away, Poplar Springs is goin' to fade out. We don't live on nothin' much but the Chappany trade."

Mr. Sloan, the banker, and Enderby, a big cattleman, and Dawson, from the general store, were only three among thirty when Mortimer sat up to face the crowd that poured into the house. They all looked at him in a painful silence, those men who packed the room. Now and then as the voice of the storm receded Mortimer could hear the excited breathing of other people in the hall.

Oliver Sloan, the banker, a huge, wide man, sat down, and in that silence he asked questions and Mortimer answered.

"How's it look in general?"

"Bad," said Mortimer.

"Hear from the Starrett place?"

"It's a sand heap."

"Over by Benson's Ford?"

"Don't you get any telephone messages?" asked Mortimer.

"All our lines are down. Hear from Benson's Ford?"

"The only thing that's left over there is hardpan."

Men drew in long breaths. This was bad news for Poplar Springs.

"What about McIntyre's?" asked Sloan.

"The sand is fence-high," said Mortimer.

"The Tumbling H—that's your place, isn't it?"

"The soil is holding there," said Mortimer. "It's only going in spots."

"That's your work," said the banker wearily. "You said that you'd button down the topsoil, and you've done it?"

"I've done it," said Mortimer, and his voice rose. "I wish to God I could have helped the whole range! It's a poor compensation to me to save my own land and see the rest go up in smoke."

THE banker paid no attention to Mortimer's protestation.

"Jenkins' place? "he asked.

"Those hills sheltered that land pretty well," said Mortimer, "but the sand is spilling over the edge of the hills and gradually covering the good soil."

"The Grand Ranch?" asked Sloan. He looked up at Mortimer with desperate eyes.

"I'm sorry," answered Mortimer slowly.

"It's gone, is it?" whispered the banker.

"Hardpan," said Mortimer.

Sloan pushed himself up out of his chair. How many of his mortgages were on mere heaps of blow-sand or hardpan acres no one could tell. But at the expression in his face that spelled ruin the crowd pushed back and let him out.

"But there's two-thirds of the Chappany still holding!" Mortimer called after him. "The worst of it there is that the water-holes are silted up. Even Miller's lakes are gone, and Charles Hancock won't let the cows come to his water. Cattle out there by the thousands are going to die. Is there any way of persuading Jim Hancock to give his son orders to let those cattle in to water?"

"Persuade him?" shouted Sloan, as he turned to look back. "I'll wring the orders out of his withered old neck with my own hands!"

The whole mob poured out of the house, with Lou Miller among the rest. Mortimer caught one glimpse of her pale face, then she was lost in the crowd. The citizens fought their way against the dust storm into "Jiggs" Dawson's General Merchandise Store, with Harry Mortimer pushing along

with them.

In the store men lounged around the stove, retaining the winter habit in the midst of hot weather. There was steady coughing, for the fine dust constantly irritated throats. In a corner two old men leaned over a checker board. One had a fine head of white hair and a beard, the other was as bald and red as a turkey gobbler, with a hanging double fold of loose red skin beneath the chin. With his toothless gums he gripped a clay pipe that was polished and brown-black with use. He was Jim Hancock. The other man was his crony, Ben Chalmers.

"You talk to old Jim, first," said Sloan.

Mortimer walked toward the players.

"See the eyes of that one?" someone near the stove muttered. "Looks like they'd been sandpapered."

Mortimer stepped up to the table.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Hancock, but—"

"If you're sorry for it, don't do it," said Jim Hancock.

XIV

BEN CHALMERS, the time-tried opponent of old Hancock, lifted his eyes and his hand from the checkerboard. He stared briefly at the interloper, then returned his attention to the game.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Hancock?" persisted Mortimer.

"I never heard of nobody I less remembered," said Hancock, without looking up.

"I'm Mortimer, from your place on the Chappany," said he.

"Then why don't you stay there?" asked Hancock.

"Miller's lakes are choked with sand."

"I wish Miller was laying choked in one of 'em," said Hancock.

"The water-holes all over our part of the range are silted up, and so are most of the tanks," explained Mortimer. "Cows are going to die by thousands unless they can get water."

"Cows have died by the thousands many a time before this," replied Hancock.

"Thousands and thousands of cattle are milling around the fence between the Miller place and your two lakes," said Mortimer.

"Let 'em mill and be damned," snapped old Hancock.

"More than cattle will be damned," stated Mortimer.

Hancock jerked up his head at last. "D'you see me playing a game of checkers, or don't you? Is a man goin' to have a little peace in the world, or has he got to be hounded into his grave by fools like you?"

"The men who own the cattle won't stand by and see them die of thirst," said Mortimer. "They'll cut the wire of the fences and let them through. It means gun fighting."

"Let 'em cut," said Hancock.

"Charlie is out with his cowhands and rifles to keep those cows back," Louise Miller said. She had sifted through to the front of the crowd.

"I hope he don't miss," said Jim Hancock. "Charlie never was worth nothin' except when it come to a fight. Then he's the out-fightin'est son I ever seen. Now shut up, Lou, and don't bother me no more."

"If a fight starts," Mortimer cried, "there are two hundred armed men to take care of Charlie and his boys! A dozen men may die, but Charlie's sure to be one of them!"

"It'll save a lot of rum for decent folks if Charlie cashes in now," growled Jim Hancock.

Mortimer made a gesture of surrender. Sloan stepped up beside him.

"Jim," he said, "there's been damned near enough grazing land wiped off the range to ruin Poplar Springs, and if the cattle die this town'll go to pot mighty fast. There's nobody but you can save the cows, without there's a war. Are you going to sit there and let everything go to hell?"

Old Jim Hancock reached back to his hip, produced a long-barreled, single-action .45, and laid it on his knee. Then he returned to his contemplation of his next move.

"Sorry there's been all this damn palaverin', Ben," he muttered.

"You're spoilin' the game with all this fool talk," complained Ben.

Mortimer had had enough. He felt sick and defeated. He jerked the door open and went across the street to Porson's saloon. In the vacant lot beside it the tarpaulin cover which housed a caterpillar tractor flapped and strained like clumsy wings trying to take flight.

In the saloon he found only two dusty cowboys at one end of the bar. Old Rip Porson leaned in an attitude of profoundly gloomy thought in front of his cracked mirror. He put out the bottle for Mortimer.

"Ain't I seen you before?" he asked.

"Once or twice," agreed Mortimer.

"You wasn't connected with mirror-bustin' a while back, was you?" asked Porson. "There was thirteen high-power skunks in here then, along with one *man*."

"That's him, Rip," said one of the cowboys. "That's Mortimer, who done the kickin', and the others got kicked."

"Are you him?" said Rip Porson, sighing. "I was kind of half hoping I'd have a chance to speak my mind to one of them low-down hounds. There used to be men on this range, but now there ain't nothin' but legs and loud talk, and no hands at all." Rip Porson tipped two fingers of whisky into a glass and tossed it off. "Now we got to import strangers. So here's to you, and drink her down."

Instead of taking a chaser, he opened his mouth and took one long, panting breath.

SOMEWHERE through the storm came the lowing of a cow, and Mortimer thought of the milling thousands of doomed cattle up the Chappany. A bowl of fresh mint sprigs that stood behind the bar caught his eyes, with its suggestion of the green and tender spring which would not come again to such a great portion of the range. He thought, also, of stubborn old Jim Hancock, without blood or heart.

"Can you mix the sort of julep that really talks to a man's insides?" he asked Porson.

"Me?" asked Rip. "Can I mix a julep. I don't give a damn what time of year it is, the fellow that drinks my mint julep knows it's the right time."

"Build me a pair of them then," said Mortimer. "Build them long and build them strong."

A few moments later he was carrying the high, frosted glasses into the General Merchandise Store. For it had come to him, dimly, that perhaps even the iron-hard nature of Jim Hancock might be altered a little with good whisky.

As he went in, Sloan was going out, with a gray, weary face, but the remainder of the crowd was packed thick around the checker game. Each player now had five crowned pieces. Mortimer put down the drinks at the right hand of each old man and stepped back.

"You can't soften up that old codger," said a sour-faced man.

Ben Chalmers' hand extended in the air, seized on a piece, and moved it. In the same slow, abstracted manner, the hand touched the glass, raised it, and tipped the drink to his lips. Jim Hancock lifted his glass at the same time. Hancock put down his drink with jarring haste. "Rye!" he exclaimed, making a face.

"I disrecollect," said Ben Chalmers slowly, "but seems like I *have* heard about folks ignorant enough to make a mint julep with Bourbon."

"Ignorant?" barked Jim Hancock.

"Ignorant," said Chalmers.

"There's only one state in the Union where a mint julep is made proper," declared Hancock. "And that's Kentucky."

"The only state is Virginia," said Ben Chalmers.

"Kentucky," said Hancock.

"Virginia," said Chalmers.

"Have I been wastin' my time all these years with an ornery old fool that don't know good whisky from bad?" demanded Hancock.

"You come from too far west to know good whisky from bad," said Chalmers. "When I think of a man of your years that ain't come to an understandin' of a right whisky—"

"East of Louisville, a right whisky ain't made," declared Hancock. "I'm drinkin' to Kentucky and the bluegrass!" He took a drink of the mint julep and made another face.

"East of Kentucky," said Ben Chalmers, "this here country got its start. When Washington and the immortal Jefferson was doin' their stuff, Kentucky was left to the wild turkeys and the Indians."

"The breed run out in Virginia," said Jim Hancock. "The men all went to Kentucky about a hundred years ago."

"An outrage and a lie!" said Chalmers, and pushed himself back with such violence that the table rocked, and the kings on the checkerboard lost their crowns.

"A Virginia gentleman," said Chalmers, rising, "wouldn't go to Kentucky except to spit!"

"Who said Virginians were gentle and who said that they were men?" barked Hancock.

Ben Chalmers uttered an inarticulate cry and fled into the storm outside.

"It *is* a great state, Kentucky," suggested Mortimer.

"Son," said Jim Hancock, "maybe you ain't quite the damn fool I been makin' you out. Kentucky is the only state in the country where they breed men and hosses right."

"They breed them with plenty of bone and blood and nerve," said Mortimer. "Which is why nobody can understand why you're afraid to go back up the Chappany and keep Charlie from killing a dozen men or so and winding up with a rope around his neck."

"Afraid?" demanded Hancock, jumping up. "Who said afraid?"

"Shake on it, then, and we'll go as soon as the storm gives us a chance," said Mortimer.

"Damn the storm!" raged old Hancock. "Why should we wait for the storm to give us a chance?"

MORTIMER suddenly remembered the caterpillar tractor with its tarpaulin, flapping in the wind. Nothing could move like a caterpillar, through all weathers, over all terrain.

"Who owns that caterpillar?" he asked, pointing through the window.

"It's mine," said the storekeeper.

"Let me rent it to go up the Chappany," said Mortimer.

"Rent it?" cried the storekeeper. "I'll give it to you! And there's nothin' else that will take you where *you* want to go!"

The big machine was ready for use, with a full tank of gas. The engine started at a touch, and the machine answered readily to the levers. Old Jim Hancock, equipped with goggles, huddled on the floor boards.

An outbreak of shouting rose from the crowd when they started. Mortimer waved in answer and shoved the tractor against the sweep of the wind. He had full canteens of water and old Jim Hancock on board, and that was all he asked for, except the ten miles an hour the caterpillar could make.

But even that ten miles, and the cutting edge of the wind, blew the dust right through the wet bandana that masked his nose and mouth, blew the fine dust down to the bottom of his lungs. Still he was jubilant whenever the machine hit a five-foot sand drift and went through it, climbing, wallowing, pluming behind it.

They entered the Chappany Valley as the tractor put its nose into a bog, a water-hole clogged by silt. Mortimer was backing out of this when a masked

figure came up to him, staggering, with outreaching hands.

He knew who it was with a constriction of his heart. He stopped the caterpillar, pulled Lou Miller into the machine, and put her on the floor. She must have ridden on the pitching tail of the tractor all the way from Poplar Springs, with the choking torrents of its own dust added to the blind outpouring of the storm. She was almost stifled when he pulled down her bandana and flashed his torch into a face begrimed and mud-caked to the eyes. Half a canteen squirted over her rinsed her white again, but still gasping. He put his lips to her ears and called:

"Your lungs! Can you get your breath?"

"I'm all right!" she answered. "Go on!"

"I'm turning back to Poplar Springs," he told her.

She caught his arm with both hands and shook it. "If you turn back, I'll throw myself out of the tractor," she cried desperately. "Go on! Go on! Think of what's happening up in the valley!"

"Ay, go on—go on!" yelled old Jim Hancock with a sudden enthusiasm.

Mortimer went on. The lights of the machine showed him a ten-foot sand drift, curving at the top like a wave about to break. He put on full speed and crashed through it. Sand flowed like heavy water over the entire tractor until he was blinded utterly. But the vibration of the racing caterpillar bucketed out the sand swiftly. If the fine dust did not get to the bearings, and if the motor was not choked, they might get through!

All they could do now was go on—go on!

XV

UP THE Chappany Valley the murk of the day's end had joined the shadow of the storm, and with the coming of the thicker darkness John Miller prepared for final action. While there was even a flicker of daylight to give the rifles of Charlie Hancock opportunity to aim he would not let his men move, but now the night had thickened the air of the valley to soup.

A floundering horse with a rider bent forward along its neck came by. "Miller!" the rider yelled. "Hi, Miller!"

"Here!" shouted Miller, and the rider turned in toward him.

He leaned out to grip the pommel of Miller's saddle, and coughed and choked, head down, before he could speak. Miller took him by the shoulders and shouted at his ear:

"Shorty, was she at the Grimes place? Or Hogan's? Is there any word?"

"No word!" gasped Shorty.

"The storm has her!" groaned Miller. "Twenty-one years of my life gone!" God be kind to her!"

He gave the word to attack, then.

The men were eager for action, for the mournful song of the thirsty cattle was maddening. Ranchers and cowhands poured into the Chappany Valley with a grim determination to rush Charlie Hancock and his men off the face of the earth.

But when they saw the actual field of battle, some of their enthusiasm left them. Near the edge of the Tumbling H lake a flat-topped mesa rose a hundred feet above the valley floor. To climb the boulders and flat walls was hard work, even in full daylight and without the burden of a gun. To clamber up through these streaks of dark and light, with a rifle to manage and good marksmen taking aim from above, looked bad.

If the storm had offered complete darkness, they could have fumbled through it and grappled with Hancock and his men, but now the sky was half the time covered and half the time lighted through rents and explosive openings. Those gleams were sufficiently frequent to give Hancock's riflemen an excellent chance to command the ap-

proaches to their rock.

Miller sent some of his men to climb the bluff above the lake, but when they reached the high land they were able to catch only glimpses of the men among the rocks, and the distance was too great for accurate shooting. Some of the ranchers wanted to cut the fences and let the cattle go trooping down to water, but it was pointed out to them that Hancock would enjoy nothing better than a chance to practice his marksmanship on dumb cattle before he started on human targets.

It was an impasse. The storm kept bringing the dolorous chorus of the cattle. Cows were dying, going down from weakness, being trampled by the milling herd. Miller's crowd wanted blood and wanted it badly, but no one wanted to lead the rush against that impregnable rock.

A big rancher named Tucker Weed among the Miller contingent, a fellow with a voice as loud as that of a champion hog-caller, raised a bellow as piercing as a bugle call. He drew the attention of everyone to a pair of lights that was staggering up the valley into the teeth of the storm.

"What is it?" Weed yelled. "No automobile could head into this smother. It ain't the old red-eyed devil come looking for us, is it?"

John Miller saw the lights disappear, then reflect dimly on the whirl of the storm as the light pointed straight at the sky.

"It's somethin' that knows a fence when it finds one," said Miller. "It's hit a fence with a sand drift backed against it!"

The two lights swerved down again, then wavered out into the level of the valley, approaching the bellowing cattle. It ran straight for only a moment, however, then swerved and headed for Charlie Hancock's rock.

The mournful chorus of the cattle had been with the three in the tractor for miles but now, as the black of the sky opened in a wide central vent, they could see the milling animals.

Old Jim Hancock stood up to look.

"Why, damn my old heart and eyes!" he cried. "Why didn't you tell me there was so many thirsty cows up here?"

IT MADE no difference that he had been told. He had a demonstration of another sort a moment later when half a dozen young steers, finding some low place in the fence or, more likely, climbing over dead animals that gave them a take-off to jump the wire, came clear of the fences and galloped toward the lake.

The leader, after half a dozen strides, bucked into the air, landed on his nose, and lay still. Another and another dropped. From the top of the rock beside the Tumbling H lake little sparks of light showed where rifles were playing. The half-dozen steers lay dead long before they brought their thirsty muzzles near the water.

"There he is!" shouted Jim Hancock. "There's that cussed boy of mine, raisin' hell! Good shootin', Charlie! But, by hell, I'm goin' to make you wish you'd never seen a gun!"

Horsemen poured suddenly about the tractor out of the night. Mortimer brought the caterpillar to a halt.

"It's the dirt doctor and old poison-face Jim Hancock himself!" a voice yelled. "And there's Lou Miller, as much alive as you and me!"

Then Miller was at the side of the machine, and Lou was in his arms. "Clear away from us!" Jim Hancock piped. "Leave me get at that Charlie fool of mine! I'm goin' to learn him what comes of spoilin' good beef when he ain't hungry."

Someone reached in and smote Mortimer's shoulder.

"Great work, old-timer!" someone else shouted.

Then the crowd had drawn back and he shoved the caterpillar on toward the rock through a moment of darkness. The headlights for a time or two showed the way a hundred feet ahead. At times

the brilliant cone choked off and they were charging blindly into the smother of the wind.

Then the zenith split open and light rushed back over the Chappany. They were under the great rock, not fifty paces from the wall when a volley of bullets struck them. The headlights went out. One of the tracks stopped. The caterpiller began to turn clumsily.

Mortimer caught at old Hancock and with him dropped to the floor of the tractor as he shut off the engine.

"Are you hurt, Jim?" he asked.

"Hell, no!" shouted Hancock. "But I reckon they've shot a leg off this old horse of ours."

The rain of bullets kept up until that funnel of brilliant sky misted over, then closed suddenly into blackness.

"Will you go on with me, Jim?" shouted Mortimer. "Will you try to climb up to them with me and talk to Charlie?"

"Don't be a fool!" barked Jim Hancock. "I'll go alone. Why should you let 'em get at *you* with their guns?"

But Mortimer went with him. He hooked his arm around the old man's body and fairly dragged him through the blind storm until they found the loom of the rock, then the wall. They paused there gasping, coughing, then started up.

The big boulders at the foot of the wall offered stepping stones at the start, but above them came almost a sheer rise. They had to wait for the next break in the windy darkness of the sky before they could take advantage of fissures on projections.

"I'll fix him!" Hancock kept muttering. "Beef butcher! Damn fool!"

They were well up the rock when guns crackled above them rapidly. A bullet streaked a white scar across the rock in front of Mortimer's face; another raked him through the back muscles with a stroke of agony. Then what felt like a knife-thrust lanced him in the side. He had a good hold on a projecting spur of rock, so he managed to keep his feet, and when old Hancock suddenly dropped, he managed to catch him by the coat and hold him swinging out over empty space.

The wind closed the gap in the sky at that moment, and the gunfire ended.

Old Jim, agile as a dried-up tomcat, went clawing up the rock.

"Charlie!" he screeched. "Charlie! You double-jointed jackass! Put down them guns or I'll—"

Mortimer followed the furious old fellow, but his strength was running out. The light came back and made him shrink. Then he saw Jim Hancock standing on the rock above him, shaking one fist above his head. Men loomed beside him. Charlie Hancock appeared.

Mortimer drew himself up to the flat top of the mesa. He had to lie flat. The pain left his side and burned only in his brain.

"Get down there!" he heard Jim Hancock shouting. "I hope they drill you full of lead! But get down there and tell 'em to open the fences up and let the cows through! Tell 'em anything you're a—mind to! Your ma died for you and you been nothing but a long, cold winter to me all your life."

DARKNESS crawled into Mortimer's brain and covered his eyes.

After a time he saw that he was lying near a fire that burned behind a screen of boulders on top of the mesa. A withered forearm with a bandage around it appeared. A hand lifted his head.

"Take a shot of this," said Jim Hancock, holding a whisky flask to Mortimer's lips.

He got down a good, long swallow. It burned some of the torment away.

"You take the rest," Jim Hancock said. "If you die, I'm goin' to have 'em hanged, every damn one of 'em—and I won't wait for the law, neither."

"No," said a big voice. "We won't wait for no law!"

That was Jan Erickson. And there were others of Mortimer's gang watching their chief with grimly set faces.

"Yes, sir," said Jim Hancock, "if you pass out, we're goin' to string 'em up, and I'll help you pull on the ropes. So you rest nice and easy."

Mortimer tried to laugh, but fingers of pain seemed to tear him half apart.

"I'm goin' to lift up your head and leave you have a look at what's happenin'," said Hancock.

Slowly and carefully he lifted Mortimer's head and shoulders until he could look over the sloping top of the mesa and down into the valley of the Chappany at Hancock Lake. The waters seemed to have living shores until his eyes cleared a little and he could see the cattle ten and twenty deep as they drank up life and new strength.

"That's pretty good," said Mortimer. "I'm glad I saw that."

"Don't talk," said Hancock. "They drilled you right through the lungs, and talkin' is poison for you."

The darkness once more began to pass over Mortimer's eyes. If he had been shot through the lungs, he had to die, and he was sure he was dying at that moment.

"I've got to talk," he said.

"Shut your mouth!" commanded Hancock.

Mortimer forced out the words slowly. "Tell Lou Miller it never was a joke. I loved her. Tell her I loved her, but I don't blame her for the way she felt . . ."

He seemed to be walking, then, through infinite darkness, feeling his way down blank walls, finding doors, opening them. And something was whistling to him far away. He opened his eyes. It was the scream of the storm he had been hearing, but far withdrawn again into the heart of the sky.

He looked down at the big arch of his chest and the great bandage which was being unwrapped by slender hands, unlike the hands usually found on a cattle range. "Promise to tell Lou," his lips were saying.

Someone leaned over him, saying, "I know, darling!"

By an effort of peering into distance, he made out her face. She was so drawn and white that, to any ordinary eye, half of her beauty was surely gone. But his eye which knew how to see her, found her far more beautiful than ever.

"Don't let him talk," a voice said.

"Make him stop talking, Lou," said Miller's voice out of the darkness.

She touched Mortimer's lips, and he kissed her hand. If there were only a few moments left, words were no good. Touching her and looking at her was all that mattered.

"He's lost blood," a crisp voice of command said. "He's lost buckets of blood, but I don't think— Give me that probe."

A finger of pain entered his breast, his side, glided back.

"Certainly not!" said that voice of authority. "The man has ribs like the ribs of a ship. And the bullet glanced around them."

The darkness covered Mortimer's eyes with a sudden hand, but through the shadow he could hear Lou's sudden, joyful outcry, fading out of his consciousness rapidly, but lodging somewhere in his heart with the promise of life and of happiness.

The Year's Best Western Novel—WARRIOR OF THE DRAGOONS, by WILLIAM HOPSON—featured in the August Issue of Our Companion Magazine GIANT WESTERN—Now on Sale, 25c at All Stands!

THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range News and Oddities

THE old time range cookie was something of a magician in tossing together whatever ingredients he had on hand to come up with a new and tasty dish. And sometimes the names for the dishes ran far behind the contraptions themselves.

The name of the genius who first looked up from a steaming bowl and said, "This is the best son-of-a-gun of a stew I ever ate," has unfortunately been lost to posterity, but his name for the dish remains. The cowboy had a little stronger phrase for it, but in polite society, it is son-of-a-gun.

Whenever a calf is killed, the tongue, liver, heart, lights, kidneys, sweetbreads and brain are brought to the cook. He dices them on a board with a long butcher knife and tosses them into a big round iron kettle. Then he throws in anything else he has on hand —potatoes, carrots or onions if he has them, a can of tomatoes or anything else. The story that he tosses in any old boots that may be around is libelous. But the rule is that if the boys can tell what's in it, it's no good.

The cowboy's recipe is simple. "You toss everything in but the hair, the horns and the holler." All this, simmered slowly for hours, turns out surprisingly delicious and furthermore it is full of vitamins, even if they hadn't been invented back in cowboy days.

Then there was something else called Son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack. This wasn't a stew; it came under the heading of dessert. The cook took whatever dried fruit—raisins, apricots, prunes, or whatnot—he had on hand, rolled them in dough, sewed the whole works in a sack and hung it in a big bucket partly filled with water and set over the fire. The sack of dough didn't touch the water, but was cooked slowly in the steam.

It took lots of steam and lots of cussin', but it made a dessert, even if the cook did call it a lot of hard names.

ESTIMATES by government experts place the number of bison—usually called buffalo—on the N. American continent at about 60,000,000 in 1600. Far more than half this number grazed in the present United States, ranging from eastern California to as far east as Illinois. The heavy buffalo plains west of the Mississippi were invaded by American hunters around 1800 when their number was probably in excess of 40,000,000. By 1880 the 40,000,000 had been reduced to less than 3,000,000.

By 1890 there were but half a million buffalo left and today the number has dwindled to a mere 22,000. A government conservation program now in effect will possibly up the number to around 50,000 by 1960.

WHEN silver was discovered in Arizona in the late 1850s the mine owners, needful of lumber with which to build huts, cleaning sheds, sluices and runways, found that though plenty of fine pine grew in the state there weren't any lumberjacks to be had. They sent to Maine for crack teams, offering as high as $150 per thousand feet of whipsawed board. In Maine jacks were getting only ten dollars per thousand feet.

It wasn't easy money, though. Besides heat and thirst and an entire new way of life, there was the Chiricahuas and other bands of Apache Indians. Several whip-saw teams were wiped out. Most of the lumberjacks hauled stakes after six months or so; one or two crews hung on for close to two years Between them the crews cut down better than five million feet of lumber.

EARLY Western pioneers borrowed a custom from their back home states, Kentucky, Missouri and Mississippi. Each week or each month, as circumstances permitted, a different family cooked dinner for the entire neighborhood. Thus folks got to know each other, exchange problems and solutions, ideas and equipment.

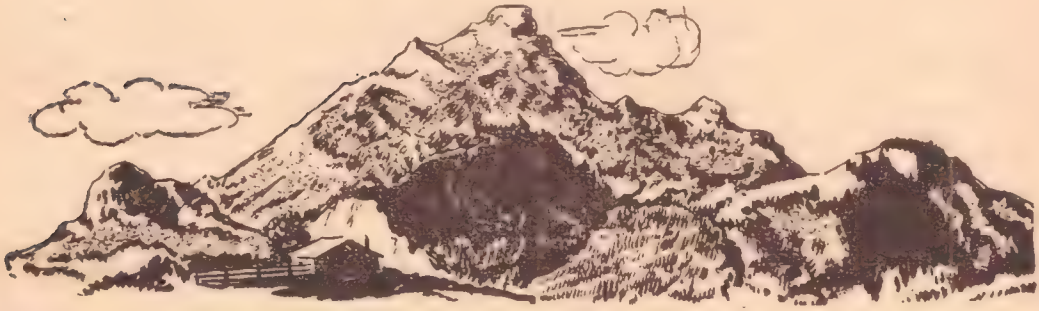
A side custom of these affairs was that the man who took the last biscuit had to up and kiss the cook in the presence of all—and it wasn't fair for one of her own menfolk to grab that last biscuit!

THE OUTLAW

By Carl L. Stader

Horrible Harry, the outlaw,
Lives back in the hills in a shack,
Eats rattlesnake's eggs for his breakfast
And cutlets of cougar for a snack.
Brews poison oak leaves for his beverage;
Has a nettle-filled tick on his bed;
Shaves with a handful of saw grass
And fills all his foes full of lead.

The coyote and panther are fearful,
The wildcat slinks to his hole;
The hawk and the eagle fly higher
When Harry is out for a stroll.
The scowl on his face is a warning
To any who'd stand in his way,
That the finger that fondles the trigger
Is itching for someone to slay.



He's the toughest of all the tough hombres
Who have strode 'neath the hemlock and fir.
He eludes all the sheriffs and their posses;
He has never once languished in stir.
There's posters on poles and out-buildings
Depicting this toughest of toughs
With a generous reward for his capture,
But he's always kept free of the cuffs.

When the bunnies play again in the valley
And the turtle doves build in the trees;
When the flowers bloom again on the hillsides
And the birds flit about in the breeze;
When the children are joyous and happy
And play in the streets unafraid;
You will know then without any doubting
That Harry the outlaw is daid.

A BALLAD OF THE WEST

Clark Benteen, cowboy and wanted man, finds his own salvation in the roaring crucible of range war when outlaws get proddy!

"Raise your hands—quick!"

I

WHEN Clark Benteen halted his horse on the hill above Tanner's Trading Post, a long and turbulent trail lay behind him. Some of the turns in that trail had marked Benteen, so that he appeared older than his twenty-four years and wiser in the ways of wickedness than a young man should be.

Now, with a three-day's growth of black whiskers bristling his angular gaunt-cheeked face, Benteen looked like a hungry drifter scouting for food. His leather vest and batwing chaps bore the scars of long usage, and bachelor patches showed in both sleeves of a faded cotton shirt which had once been blue.

But Clark Benteen was no grubline rider. Far from it. Fifteen hundred dollars in double-eagles were tightly wedged between the two-ply leather of his vest—a golden lining that made a pleasant weight against his back.

Intently, with a thorough regard for small details, Benteen peered at Tanner's place. There was no sign nor sound of life, save for four horses fighting flies in a corral beyond the old adobe building. Three of those horses were familiar to Benteen—Tanner's dun gelding, a sorrel mare and her yearling colt. It was the fourth animal, a big bay with black points, which attracted Benteen's attention. The bay hadn't been there a month ago, and that saddle on the kak pole wasn't Tanner's center-fire rig.

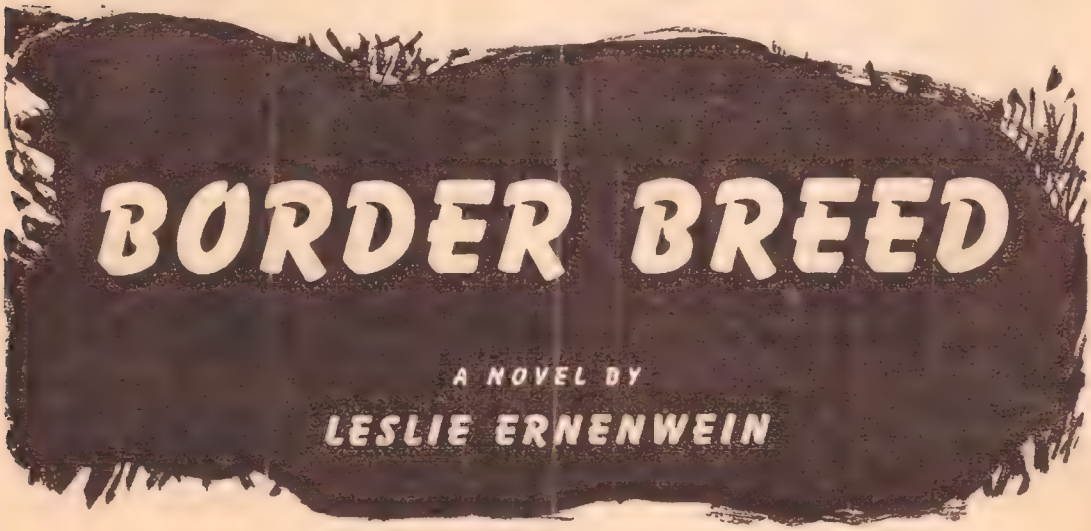
"Might mean somethin'," Benteen reflected.

Few visitors stopped at the trading post long enough to bother putting a horse in the corral. Mostly they tied up at the hitch-rail, transacted their business and went on. There was nothing here to keep them longer than they had to stay.

Benteen scanned the rubbish-littered yard for another five minutes, wondering about the bay's owner. Jube Tanner had no kinfolk hereabouts, nor any friends who'd be likely to spend a day with him. A man would be mighty hard up for company to hang around Jube Tanner longer than he had to. But someone was down there with Tanner now, someone who intended to stay a while.

Was it the law? A deputy sheriff, or

Copyright, 1946, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in May, 1946, Thrilling Western



some U. S. marshal snooping around?

"I'll soon know," Benteen muttered.

Nudging his gun loose in its well-oiled half-breed holster, he rode on down the hill.

Three rough-and-tumble years on both sides of the Mexican border had put an abiding wariness in Clark Benteen. Mistrust of men's motives, including those of Jube Tanner who supplied the gun-running trade, was Benteen's habit. If there was any honor among thieves he had never witnessed it with the Border Bunch. It was dog eat dog and heaven help the man who played the game otherwise.

BENTEEN rode into the yard and had nearly reached the hitch-rail in front of the house when a ponderous, flabby-faced man appeared in the doorway. Jube Tanner seldom smiled, and he didn't now.

"Light down and rest your saddle," he invited. "You're two days late."

"Got delayed a trifle," Benteen said. Then he asked, "You got a visitor, Jube?"

Tanner shook his bald head. "Whatever give you that idea?" he asked.

Benteen glanced at the corral.

"You sure do notice things," Tanner said. "Never seen a man so downright curious." Then he explained, "A feller practically gave me the bay, account it went lame on him. He took the next stage to Tombstone."

"So?"

Benteen seemed satisfied, but he wondered why Jube Tanner was lying. A man wouldn't leave a good saddle like that. He'd take it with him on the stage. It took time and money to get a saddle made right; a rider wouldn't part with one if he could help it.

"Where's your pack-mules?" Tanner inquired.

Benteen shrugged and dismounted, taking care to keep the doorway in sight as he stepped down.

"Told you it was my last trip to Sonora," he said. "Sold my mules, along with the Winchesters."

"Did Durango pay off in eagles, like he promised?" Tanner asked.

His voice was so casual that it fanned Benteen's growing suspicion, for Jube Tanner seldom spoke lightly of gold. There wasn't a greedier man in Arizona Territory, nor one more miserly.

"Yes," Benteen said. "Durango paid off just like he promised."

Glancing past Tanner, Benteen saw that the pinewood bar was deserted. If the bay's owner was still here he would be waiting in the back room. But why should Tanner keep his presence a secret? And what was the fellow after?

"Fifteen hundred dollars in gold," Tanner said, smacking his pursy lips.

That startled Clark Benteen. It was as if Jube had answered the question he had been asking himself.

"Fifteen hundred," Tanner repeated, "and half of it clear profit, for one month's work. You must be loco to quit a game like that!"

Benteen grinned. Tanner wasn't being casual now. He was talking loud —loud enough for a man in the back room to hear him. And because Benteen had already decided how this deal was rigged, he stepped up to the stoop in the easy fashion of a man primed for nothing more dangerous than a glass of beer.

"Ain't you going to unsaddle and stay the night?" Tanner asked.

"No, just long enough to sample your beer and buy a little grub for my ride north," Benteen said. "I can make ten more miles before sundown."

Tanner seemed disappointed. "You must be in a mighty big hurry," he complained. "You got a girl waitin' for you at Travaho?"

"Girl, hell," Benteen muttered. "There's no girl waiting for me in Travaho, nor anywhere else. I've learned my lesson on that score. Learned it good. For keeps. I'm going to build me a homestead in the Tailholt Hills and batch it into a sure-enough cow camp. A man can build up a nice spread in

"I'm arrestin' you for shootin' Marshal Hawk Halliday," Benteen said quietly

four-five years if he has something to start with. And I've got it."

"But this ain't no time to start nothin' in that country," Tanner objected. "There's a range rumpus on between Pike Kirby and Jeff Belmont that looks like the makin's of another Lincoln County War. It's a good place to keep away from right now."

"So?" Benteen prompted, more interested than he cared to reveal.

"Stage driver told me last week that Kirby has hired a bunch of outside riders. He said that gunhawks are crowdin' into Travaho like flies swarmin' a sorghum keg, and there's already been considerable shootin'. All hell's broke loose, he told me." Tanner looked at Benteen curiously and asked, "Say, didn't you ramrod Belmont's Rafter B outfit maybe back three or four years ago?"

REMEMBERING how stubbornly he had tried to talk Jeff Belmont into stopping Kirby's grass-grabbing tactics at that time, Benteen felt a grim satisfaction in knowing he had been right. But because the Rafter B had been the nearest thing to home he'd known in ten years of drifting, Benteen also felt a familiar sense of lack, and loneliness. His war talk three years ago had cost him more than a job. It had also cost him the only girl he had ever wanted.

"They say Belmont is bankrupt," Tanner reported. "Hasn't got a dollar left in cash and damn little credit. But I suppose the old coot'll hang on until he runs out of bullets."

"Yeah," Benteen reflected soberly. "That's how it will be with Jeff. He's the kind that never quits, even when he's licked. It would've been a different story if he'd battled Kirby three years ago. The Rafter B could've whipped that PK outfit to a standstill in one week's time."

"Well, it ain't no skin off your rump," Tanner suggested. "Unsaddle your horse and rest your pants a spell."

It occurred to Benteen that there was something behind this show of hospitality. Jube Tanner didn't give a hoot for any man's companionship. All that trader wanted was money. Easy money. And there wasn't much he wouldn't do to get it. If Jube wanted him to stay here over night there was a reason. And there was a window in Tanner's back room that would make a perfect perch for shooting at a man who was leading his horse toward the corral.

"No," Benteen said. "I'll be going on directly."

Tanner shrugged and went inside and Benteen trailed him, taking particular notice of the blanket-draped doorway to Tanner's living quarters at the rear of the store. If he stood a trifle sideward at the bar he could watch that blanket. Jube, who wore no gun and was a coward to boot, could be ignored.

The thought came to Benteen that there was just a chance Jube had told the truth about the bay's rider taking the stage. Perhaps, Benteen reflected, he had spent too long a time on the back trails below the Border. A man got downright spooky, riding alone so much. He got to looking around corners and dodging his own shadow.

But that was over and done with now. By this time day after tomorrow he would be in Travaho, drinking a glass of "Dutch" Orondorff's good bourbon. Then he would deposit his money at the bank and file on a homestead. Perhaps he would even get to see Jane Belmont.

Benteen was thinking about Jane's blonde beauty as he followed Tanner toward the bar. There was a girl to make a man see pictures in his campfire on lonely nights. A proud and proper girl.

Tanner seemed in a tolerable hurry now. He strode down the long room with unaccustomed rapidity. So Benteen stepped lively also, keeping a strict watch on the blanketed doorway. There was something wrong here. He was sure of it now. The sense of it was like a cold wind blowing against him.

He saw Tanner dodge to the left, and at this same instant, as a gun began blasting behind him, Benteen felt the smashing impact of a bullet against his back. They were like swift blows, those bullets; like clubs beating him down.

Vaguely, as from a far distance, Benteen heard Tanner yell, and heard the gun blast again. Then the floor's dusty boards thudded against his face.

* * * *

When the westbound stage stopped on the crest of Spanish Pass to give the sweat-lathered horses a breathing spell, Deputy Marshal Halliday stepped down to stretch his legs. They were about ten miles east of Tanner's Trading Post.

"Isn't there a short-cut to Travaho from Tanner's place?" the lawman asked.

"Yeah," "Snapper" Smith, the driver, said. "A horseback trail that saves upwards of a hundred miles. Skips Tombstone entirely."

Halliday scanned the sun-baked land ahead for familiar landmarks. His blue eyes held a faded, washed-out expression and what hair showed beneath the brim of his battered Stetson was bleached to tarnished silver; but his gaunt, high-beaked face retained the same shrewd alertness which had caused men to call him "Hawk" Halliday fifteen years ago. As they still did.

"I used to know my way around this end of Arizona real well," Halliday said as he climbed back to the driver's seat. "Punched cows for Jeff Belmont before I went into the badge-toter business."

SMITH nodded, and eased his six-horse hitch down the steep grade.

"I'd save two days by borrowing a horse from Tanner," Halliday said, "and taking the short-cut trail."

Smith chuckled. "Don't reckon Jube would lend a horse, but he might rent one. He's quite a hand to collect the cash, Jube is. I've even heard of him sellin' water by the bucket durin' dry spells. Beats all, how some jiggers crave money. I guess Tanner has it real bad."

"So I've heard," Halliday said, and dug out a stubby-stemmed briar pipe. "I've also heard that Jube might know who's running guns into Sonora."

"That wouldn't be why you're in such a sweat to reach Travaho, would it?" Smith remarked, as if thinking aloud.

He glanced questioningly at Halliday and found the lawman giving his full attention to tamping tobacco into the briar. Halliday finally got the smoke drawing to suit him.

"They say that range war between Rafter B and PK looks real bad for old Jeff," he said then.

Snapper Smith nodded. "I didn't suppose the U. S. marshal's office interfered in things like that," he suggested.

"It don't," Halliday muttered.

"Then that ain't why you're here either," Smith said musingly.

There was a plain note of curiosity in the stage driver's voice, but Halliday ignored it.

"What's behind the trouble?" he asked.

"Same old story. Two outfits needin' the same grass. Pike Kirby has been buildin' up to this deal for five years. You could tell that by the way he operated. He helped Pinky Weaver get elected sheriff, so he knowed Pinky wouldn't interfere when he started importin' Border riffraff for a showdown battle with the Rafter B. They say Kirby's ranch is a regular renegades' roost now, with damn near as many men as he's got cattle. They say you can see half the Texas Wild Bunch lined up at Orondorff's bar in Travaho of a Saturday night."

"So I've heard," Halliday announced. "That's why I'm headin' for Travaho."

Snapper Smith loosed a sigh. "You sure had me guessin'," he admitted. "Have you got some certain outlaw in mind that might be there?"

Halliday nodded. But he didn't mention a name.

II

FOR a queerly blank interval Clark Benteen heard nothing at all. Then, as his shocked senses cleared, he heard Jube Tanner's voice. But Jube wasn't talking. He was making sounds of pain.

Benteen opened his eyes, and when they finally came into focus, he saw why Tanner was groaning. The big trader was sitting with his back to the bar, both hands pressed against his chest. Blood dribbled redly between his tallow-white fingers.

That didn't make sense to Benteen, until he moved. Then a sharp lance of pain ran up across his left shoulder and he remembered the shooting—the impact of bullets against his back. He got slowly to his feet and was aware of blood's warm wetness on his shoulder.

But the lower part of his back didn't feel wet, nor painful when he moved. There was no feeling in it at all. Yet he distinctly remembered the terrific pound of bullets.

"The cussed thief!" Tanner whined. "The double-crossin' son leavin' me here to die!"

At the words Clark Benteen recalled the gold lining in his leather vest. He didn't need to look to know the vest was gone. He could tell that by the lack of weight. And now, as some of the numbness receded from his back and a throbbing ache set in, he understood why those bullets hadn't penetrated his body. The first two had smashed against the tight-packed gold eagles, knocking him over so that the third bullet had sliced horizontally across his left shoulder-blade as he went down.

The gold, which had motivated the shooting, had saved his life!

A mirthless smile slanted Benteen's whisker-shagged face. That was luck for you. Left-handed luck. Old Dame Fortune sure played peculiar tricks on a man. She coaxed him into a drygulch game with the cards stacked against him, then handed him the joker.

But even though he had lost his homestead stake there was plenty to be thankful for, Benteen realized. It wasn't often that a man got hit with that many bullets and lived to talk about it. And now, as he glanced at Tanner, an even more ironical idea came to him. Could it be that the bullet which had creased his shoulder had gone on to hit the greedy son who had framed this drygulch deal?

"Who did the shooting, Jube?" he asked.

Tanner ignored him. The trader kept pressing his hands to his bloody shirt, kept mumbling and moaning. His glazed eyes were set in an hypnotic stare at the blood which dripped down to stain his buff-colored California pants.

Benteen peered at the front door, saw how it had been pushed away from the wall, and knew that his assailant had waited there behind it instead of in the back room. A mocking smile quirked Benteen's lips at the thought that he had overlooked the most logical place of all. Any ten-year-old boy, suspecting someone was hiding on him, would have been cagey of that pushed-back door.

"So simple a trap, I walked right into it," Benteen muttered. Then he walked over to Tanner and demanded again: "Who was it, Jube?"

The wounded trader didn't look up.

"Worden," he mumbled, and stared at the blood dribbling from beneath his fat fingers. "We was goin' to divvy up your gold, but he took it all. Every damn double-eagle of it, and robbed me to boot."

Benteen laughed at him. "Serves you right for double-crossing a man who has made you a big smear of money. I paid you cash for those Winchesters, Jube—cash in advance."

"But you was quittin'," Tanner explained. "You was leavin' me high and dry without a runner to keep the business goin'."

His lips were blue, except where a crimson froth stained them, and now his bald head sagged sideward. Jube Tanner was dying as he had lived, thinking about money. Easy money.

"Which way did Worden go?" Benteen asked.

"North," Tanner said weakly, "and I hope you catch the dirty son."

His head lolled loosely and his blood-smeared hands sagged down until they rested palms up on his broad thighs. Sitting so, with an expression of utter resignation on his slack-jawed face, Tanner looked like a propped corpse.

"What does Worden look like?" Benteen demanded, quickly, toughly.

TANNER tried to speak again, but blood filled his throat so that the distorted words he mumbled were a meaningless jumble. He coughed and went into a spasm of retching, then just sat there with an awful fear in his eyes.

"Talk, curse you!" Benteen ordered. "Is Worden tall, or short—fat or thin?"

"He's—" Tanner began, then loosed a long, gurgling groan.

When it ended, Jube Tanner was dead.

Benteen frowningly considered the grotesque spectacle of the trader's bar-propped body. There had been something gross about Tanner when he was alive; in death he looked like a drooling monster. And because Benteen felt no compassion, he cursed Tanner—not for tolling him into a Judas trap, but for failing to describe Worden before he died.

"How in blazes can I find Worden if I don't know what he looks like?" Benteen muttered, as if arguing with Tanner. "He'll change his name, and I'll have nothin' to go by. Nothin' at all."

Then he remembered the big bay. That might help a little, though there were a lot of bay broncs in Arizona, and Benteen hadn't seen the brand on Worden's horse. Yet even so, he felt a sense of anticipation as he helped himself to provisions from the shelves.

"It may take some doin'," he reflected, ignoring the growing pain in his bullet-bruised back. "But I'll find him, regardless."

He *had* to find him, or lose the only real stake he had ever had. The stake that would set him up in the cow business.

When Benteen passed Tanner's body on his way to the door, he said mockingly:

"I'd plant you proper, Jube, if I wasn't in such a rush."

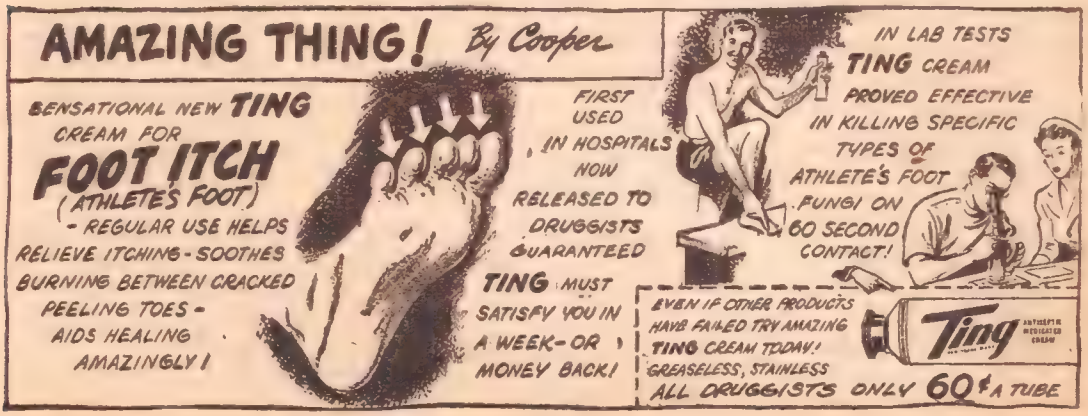
Yet he took time to open the corral gate, so the three horses could reach a stack of hay behind the barn.

It was nearing sundown when Benteen lost Worden's trail on a bald ridge of black malpais. Dismounting he led his tired sorrel gelding in a circle that revealed no sign of recent travel. Worden had been headed north when the big bay's hoofprints petered out, but that didn't mean he would continue in that direction. A man who had left two victims for dead might change directions a dozen times in an effort to throw off possible pursuit.

Benteen made another circle, scanning the rock that was like smelter slag, so hard that unshod hoofs wouldn't scar it. There wasn't a sign. Not a thing to go by.

Cursing, Benteen put his eyes to a questing study of the broken, brush-blotched country ahead, hoping to sight a dust plume, but found none. Northwest the Dragoons rose in rugged splendor, their eastern slopes already cloaked in lavender shadows. Worden, he guessed, was no more than one hour's riding time away from him, but where? In what direction had he gone? Would the back-shooting thief continue north along this rock-studded ridge, or turn west toward Tombstone?

[*Turn page*]



With the fatalistic gesture of a losing gambler, Benteen shrugged—and winced. His shirt, which had pulled free of the blood-gummed wound when he dismounted, had stuck again, and once more pulled free.

"Curse Worden's soul!" Benteen muttered.

He rode down the first canyon he came to and, finding a shallow seep of water, decided to camp. It would be dark in another few minutes and his horse had been on the go all day, except for that brief rest at Tanner's place.

Benteen hobbled his horse and gathered a supply of firewood. It got cold in this high country after sundown, and he missed the protection of his old leather vest. Remembering all the years he had worn it, and that it had been a Christmas present from Jane Belmont, Benteen cursed again. The drygulcher would probably discard it, transferring the gold pieces to another hiding place.

When he had built a fire and prepared a frugal supper, Benteen ate without relish. The wound in his shoulder didn't hurt except when he moved, but his back ached as if it had been pounded with a fence post. Added to that discomfort was the realization that after three tedious, law-dodging trips into Sonora with gun-laden mules, he still didn't have a homestead stake. After all his fine plans for the future he was returning to Travaho as he had left it—practically broke.

It was enough to sour a man on life.

"I've got to find Worden," Benteen muttered monotonously. "I've got to."

LIKE a man deliberately tormenting himself, he recalled then the last time he had seen Jane Belmont. She had stood beside her proud old father in the big living room at the Rafter B and said quietly:

"I agree with Dad. If the wild streak in you has to be fed on gunsmoke you'd better go somewhere else to do your fighting."

Remembering that now, as he had so many times before, Benteen swore dejectedly. They had treated him as if he were a witless fool, an itchy-fingered young devil wanting to show off. That was what old Jeff had called him, not believing what he said about Pike Kirby.

And Jane had felt the same way about it. In spite of all they had meant to each other, she had turned her back on him. Smarting with resentment, he had packed his warbag, ridden into Travaho and gone on a crazy spree of drinking and gambling until his saved-up wages were gone. A fool way to act, of course, but it had seemed the thing to do at the time.

He had done a lot of riding since then, and more fighting than he liked to remember. But he hadn't forgotten the scornful expression in Jane's eyes the day he left the Rafter B. She had looked as if he had smallpox and might contaminate her.

Benteen built a cigarette and smoked it. He was sitting like that, with a deep frown on his firelit face, when a gruff voice called from the darkness:

"Raise your hands—quick!"

For a fleeting instant Benteen weighed his chances.

The voice came from directly behind him, which meant that he made a plain target outlined against the campfire. A target no marksman would miss. Yet even so Benteen teetered on the thin edge of diving across the fire's glowing embers.

If he could duck the first bullet!

"Make up your mind," the voice prompted.

Benteen guessed his assailant was less than fifteen or twenty feet away. Too close to miss him, even if he made a flying dive.

"All right, Worden," Benteen said.

Raising his hands shoulder high, he turned to see a tall, hawk-featured man step warily into the circle of firelight, a man he recognized instantly.

"Hawk Halliday!" Benteen exclaimed,

staring at the oncoming lawman. "A trifle off your home range, ain't you?"

Halliday eyed him narrowly, holding his gun hip high. "I could say the same for you," he muttered and lifted Benteen's Colt from holster, using his left hand with expert deftness. "Tol'able careless of a man to sit dreaming at a campfire only ten miles from the galoot he killed. Where's your pardner at?"

"Pardner?"

"The name you called sounded like Worden," Halliday said. "You must've been expectin' him."

A mirthless smile twisted Benteen's lips. "Not exactly," he said. "But I was hopin' to see him some time soon. You don't happen to know Worden, do you, Hawk?"

"What's he look like?"

"Well, that depends," Benteen said, and gave his attention to shaping a cigarette. "If he happened to get shot between the eyes he'd look like a corpse, and if he caught a bad case of smallpox he'd look like hell. Otherwise he'd look about the same as the last time you saw him."

"I've never seen a man named Worden," the marshal said.

"Neither have I," Benteen admitted, and grinned at the bewildered expression in Halliday's faded eyes.

"You loco?" the old lawman demanded.

Benteen lit his cigarette with a burning twig and gestured toward the smoke-blackened coffee can.

"Have yourself a drink, while I tell you about this no good son Worden," he invited. "It's quite a yarn, and one you may not believe, but I'll tell it, regardless."

III

BENTEEN described the shooting at Tanner's place for the deputy marshal without mentioning his gold-laden vest.

"How come Worden only shot you once," Halliday asked, "and that just a crease?"

That was a question Benteen didn't want to answer. If he told about the gold in the vest, Halliday would be suspicious enough to back-trail him to the Border, in which case he would learn about the gun-running deal.

"Worden thought he drilled me first shot," Benteen said, "then turned his gun on Tanner. Reckon he was a trifle excited."

Halliday shook his head. "It don't tally, Benteen. Your story don't make sense. I've heard some queer ones in my time, but yours takes the silver-mounted saddle with 'Champ' lettered on it. If somebody else shot Tanner why did you leave the poor feller settin' there against his bar without even closin' the door to keep the coyotes away from him."

"I was in a hurry to trail Worden," Benteen said.

But he knew that Halliday had made up his mind. Nothing he could say would change this lawdog's opinion.

"But not in such a hurry that you couldn't take time to turn Tanner's horses out of the corral," Halliday said accusingly.

"Well, I didn't want 'em goin' hungry," Benteen explained. "There was no tellin' how long it would be before somebody came along."

Halliday laughed at him, a humorless, scoffing laugh. "So you thought more of them broncs than you did of Tanner."

"Never said I liked Tanner," Benteen muttered. "In fact, I hated his greedy insides."

A sly smile slanted Halliday's gaunt cheeks. "That's more like it," he said and drew a pair of handcuffs from his pocket.

"I hated him, but I didn't shoot him," Benteen objected.

"You can explain that to Sheriff Weaver at Travaho," Halliday announced. "And to the jury that tries you for killin' Tanner. . . ."

It was close to daylight when Halliday woke Benteen by removing the manacles.

"Coffee's ready," he said.

The lawman had already saddled his

own horse, which Benteen recognized as being Tanner's dun gelding. The saddle was Jube's single-rigged outfit. He was wondering about that while he ate in moody silence. How had Halliday happened to arrive at Tanner's so soon after the shooting?

"Were you ridin' the westbound stage?" he said.

Halliday nodded. "Was aimin' to rent a horse from Tanner for a trip to Travaho."

So that was it. Old Dame Fortune had pulled another of her pranks. And this time she wasn't handing Clark Benteen the joker.

As Benteen saddled his sorrel he hoped that Halliday would dispense with the handcuffs. It wouldn't be quite so bad then, riding into Travaho. At least folks wouldn't know he was under arest until later. But that hope was soon banished, for the lawman snapped them on again.

"Just so you don't get foolish notions," he said drily.

Benteen nodded at his empty holster.

"Not takin' any chances, are you, Hawk?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not with killers," Halliday said gruffly. "None at all."

For hours then they rode in silence, climbing long, tedious slopes where the barbed branches of catclaw and mesquite snatched at Benteen's shirt sleeves as he held up his manacled hands to protect his face. At noon, when they quartered into the north-south trail, Benteen scanned the dust for sign of recent hoofprints and finding none, guessed that Worden had headed for Tombstone.

He was tempted then to tell Halliday about the double-eagles and admit how he had acquired them. Then he could suggest they go to Tombstone and try to capture Worden. But he thought: "If Hawk believes my story he'll have me on a Federal offense." And even if they caught Worden there would be only his word, the word of a confessed gun-runner.

So Benteen shrugged off the idea. Better to take his chances with a jury, or hope for an opportunity to escape . . .

The trail dipped occasionally into dry washes and twisted through deep arroyos, but mostly it gained altitude. The brush gave way to sprawling piñon and wind-twisted pine. By mid-afternoon they crossed the timbered crest of Whetstone Divide and were easing down its north slope when the sound of distant shooting came faintly to Benteen.

Halliday heard it also. "Over towards the Rafter B," he muttered.

RECALLING what Tanner had told him about the range war, Benteen wondered about Jane. She was the true daughter of a peace-loving father, and violence would be extremely distressing to her. How was she taking the last-ditch struggle against Pike Kirby? Chances were that she wasn't at the ranch. Old Jeff would make her stay in town with friends.

He grimaced, dreading the thought of her seeing him ride into Travaho handcuffed like a hog-tied coyote. A manacled killer on his way to jail!

That would be how he would look to Jane. His long lips twisted into a cynical smile at the realization that she would think him guilty. Jane had accused him of having a wild streak; now she would be sure of it.

"The devil with her," he muttered.

"What's that?" Halliday inquired.

"Just thinkin' out loud," Benteen explained.

Another burst of rifle reports sounded off to the west as they rode across the Rafter B's south range. This was familiar country to Benteen. He had ridden every mile of it on uncounted occasions while working for Jeff Belmont.

"Sounds like a regular battle goin' on," Halliday muttered, canting his head to listen.

Benteen rode in moody silence, dreading the ordeal of riding into town handcuffed. A penniless man could have his dignity. A shabby saddle tramp could hold his head high despite an empty stomach. But not a man with steel manacles on his wrists.

And the thought of jail made him squirm. A range-bred man would be better off dead than in a prison cell. He would go stark, raving mad in one month's time.

Benteen was preceding Halliday into a narrow pass between two timbered hills when a bullet whanged past his head. That sizzling sound was instantly echoed by a rifle's sharp report. Dodging instinctively, Benteen yanked his horse into a pivoting turn and glimpsed separate puffs of powder smoke on the hill above. He dodged again as the air lash of another bullet fanned his right cheek.

He heard Halliday blurt a curse. Swinging his horse off the trail, Benteen saw the lawman tilt up his gun. But Halliday never fired it. He fell back in saddle as if struck by an invisible club. His body sagged sideward, spooking the excited dun. When the horse wheeled sharply, Hawk went down in a limp, headlong fall. And in this tumultuous moment of dust-hazed confusion, Benteen's bronc collapsed like a burst bag, dropping so suddenly that Benteen had no time to jump clear.

The sorrel died as he went down.

Benteen lay motionless, his right leg pinned beneath the sorrel's side. He heard hoofs on the ridge above him and thought: "They'll come down for a look-see," and hoped his blood-stained shirt would fool them into thinking he was dead.

Dislodged stones clattered down the steep side of the pass and presently two riders halted on a shelf of rock some fifty feet above the spot where Benteen lay. Watching narrowly through lowered lids, Benteen recognized Pike Kirby and his foreman, "Red" Stambaugh.

"There's two that won't get back to the Rafter B," Kirby said, his dark, lantern-jawed face showing no more than casual interest as he peered into the pass.

A gloating grin rutted Stambaugh's roan cheeks. "We got 'em whittled down to size," he bragged. "Can't be more'n three or four Belmont riders left."

Benteen held himself rigidly still, scarcely breathing. Both those men held Winchesters, and at any moment they might slam more bullets down here just to make sure. Especially Red Stambaugh, who had a kill-crazy streak in him. The redhead had once worked at the Rafter B for a few days, and had been discharged for drawing a gun during an argument over a bunkhouse poker game. A bad one, Stambaugh. A fit foreman for Pike Kirby who intended to steal a whole range.

A green-bellied horsefly lit on Benteen's cheek, the contact causing a reflex twitch that he barely controlled. Another fly lit on his nose, flittered up to his forehead. Benteen kept his face muscles steady, well knowing that the slightest move now would bring a bullet. He watched Kirby shove three fresh shells into the loading gate of his gun then, as the two men turned their horses and rode away. Benteen loosed a sigh of relief.

"A fool for luck," he told himself.

BUT presently, when Kirby and Stambaugh had rimmed the ridge and Benteen endeavored to pull free of the dead sorrel, he wasn't so sure about his luck. There didn't seem to be much weight on his leg. He managed to ease around so that he could sit up. But he couldn't pull the leg free.

Hawk Halliday lay where he had fallen, so close that Benteen could hear his gusty breathing. Blood showed on the lawman's temple, and his left pants leg was stained above the knee where a slug had ripped his thigh. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be dying.

"Serves him right," Benteen reflected, feeling no pity.

Bracing his free boot against the saddle, Benteen put all his strength into a struggle to extricate himself. For a moment, as the trapped leg inched a trifle from under the sorrel's side, Benteen thought he was going to make it, thought that Dame Fortune had dealt him another joker. But his spur was fouled in the cinch webbing. His leg would come

only so far, and there was not enough leeway to work the rowel free.

"Joker, hell!" Benteen muttered.

A man could die of hunger and thirst in a fix like this. He could struggle and sweat and curse for a week and die in agony like a paw-trapped coyote.

Benteen relaxed, panting from his desperate effort. He watched a buzzard circle slowly overhead, observing how gracefully the black scavenger came down on tilted wings. When the buzzard swooped low Benteen scared it off with shouted curses and waving arms. Then, struggling with the desperation of a trapped animal, he tried to pull his foot out of the boot. But even though the boot was old, it was a snug fit and there was weight on it besides.

"I'll have to break that spur strap or the cinch, one," he said stubbornly, and continued the struggle until exhaustion forced him to quit. Then he lay back panting and sweating.

It was dusk now, and night's coldness crept into the pass. Benteen called Halliday's name, thinking the lawman might have regained consciousness. But there was no answer. Craving a smoke, Benteen maneuvered his shackled hands to his shirt pocket, got out the makings and shaped a cigarette.

The smoke tasted good. It relieved the gnawing hunger grind in his stomach. But it didn't banish the awful dread that gnawed at his mind. The dread of slow death.

Afterward Benteen fell into fitful slumber and awoke shivering, to find a cold drizzle of rain sifting into the pass. For upward of an hour he resumed the struggle to free his numbed leg. But it was a futile fight. Resting again, he told himself that he must figure some other way of getting loose. And he knew dismally that there was no other way.

For a long time he lay there in the rain-drizzled darkness and remembered many things—how lovely Jane Belmont had looked the first time he kissed her, how she had whispered, "Clark, darling," as he had held her tight. The world had seemed all new and bright then.

Benteen listened for sound of Halliday's breathing, and heard none. The lawman, he supposed, was dead.

"He died easy," Benteen muttered enviously.

Then he slept again, unmindful of the cold rain that pelted against his sweat-streaked face.

IV

THE sun was high when Benteen awoke again. Almost at once he noticed that Hawk Halliday had rolled over during the night, so that he was within easy reach. And the handcuff key was dangling at the end of a gold watch chain on the lawman's vest!

Quickly, feverishly, Benteen snatched the key. Even though removing the manacles wouldn't free him from the sorrel's carcass, it would make him feel less like a trapped coyote. The tubular key slipped from his perspiring fingers while he tried to maneuver it into the locking mechanism of the left-hand manacle. The three-link chain between the handcuffs didn't allow much leeway. He dropped the key again, but on the next try made it, and the key turned easily. A moment later his other hand was free.

Benteen flung the manacles far into the brush. He gave a gusty sigh, stretched his aching arms, and felt like a free man. Even with his foot trapped beneath the sorrel he felt free.

The pangs of hunger made a clutching ache in Benteen's stomach, and thirst was like a grasping hand at his throat. He leaned forward, straining so far that his trapped leg seemed on the verge of breaking, and finally managed to reach the canteen on his saddle. The water was warm, but it was gloriously wet.

Five slow-circling buzzards made moving shadows on the dust. They were like taunting symbols, those shadows, like morbid messengers of doom.

When Hawk Halliday moaned weakly, Benteen eased a few drops of water

between the lawman's fever-flaked lips. It pleased him, somehow, to know the lawman was still alive; gave him a queer sense of satisfaction to know Hawk hadn't died easily. He glanced at the marshal's blood-soaked leg.

"Must've severed a main artery," he muttered. "Few more hours of bleeding and you'll be a gone goose, Hawk."

Acting instinctively, Benteen leaned forward again and removed his rope from the saddle, intending to fashion a tourniquet above the wound on Halliday's thigh. Then the thought came to him that this badge-toter was convinced he had killed Jube Tanner, and would so testify if he lived.

"To blazes with you!" Benteen mumbled.

He built another cigarette and tried to keep his eyes off Halliday. But Hawk moaned repeatedly. Cursing himself for a fool, Benteen fashioned a tight tourniquet on the marshal's leg. Then he worked at pulling free of the sorrel's fly-swarming carcass. Hour after hour, he worked and cursed and sweated, while buzzards circled monotonously in patient vigil.

They seemed to know he would fail, those black scavengers. They seemed to be laughing at him, jeering at his frantic, futile efforts. Benteen cursed them. He shook his fists and screeched at them.

Afternoon's scorching heat plucked the moisture from his sweat-soaked shirt. He took frugal swallows from the canteen and wondered how long a man could live on water alone. For the first time then it occurred to him that he must surely die in this forsaken pass, that he would become buzzard bait along with the sorrel and Hawk Halliday. What a feast they would make for the winged devils of disaster! It made his flesh crawl to think of it.

Benteen was savoring the awful portent of that dismal thought when the sound of a walking horse jerked him alert. His first thought was that some PK raider was on the prowl. He glanced at Halliday's fallen gun and understood that there wasn't a chance to reach it. Then he remembered that his own gun had been stuck into the waistband of the lawman's riding pants. But it wasn't there now. Must have fallen out when Halliday tumbled off his horse.

But where was it?

Eagerly, as if he were seeking a fabulous treasure, Benteen peered about. The gun must be nearby. Then he glimpsed its barrel protruding beneath the marshal's body. Quickly rolling Halliday over, Benteen snatched up the gun and had it cocked when he turned to face the oncoming rider.

If that was Red Stambaugh or Pike Kirby there would be more buzzard bait here *muy pronto!*

IN THIS tense instant, as a black horse came tramping through the brush, Clark Benteen stared in bug-eyed astonishment. The black's rider was a girl—a blonde, blue-eyed girl who spoke quietly.

[*Turn page*]

Distilled from 100% Grain Neutral Spirits — 90 Proof
Mr. Boston Distiller Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

"I saw the buzzards and rode over to see what had attracted them."

Then she stared at him.

"Clark!" she exclaimed. "Clark Benteen!"

"Hello, Jane," he greeted, peering at her in the dazed fashion of a man not quite sure of what he saw.

Her smoke-blue eyes and tip-tilted nose and full, sweet-curved lips were exactly as they had been three years ago, yet she seemed different. She seemed changed, somehow

"Clark, you're hurt!" she cried, hastily dismounting.

Watching her, Benteen understood what the different was. Three years had changed Jane Belmont from a girl into a woman, had given her oval face and supple body a lush, full-blown beauty. Even her honey-colored hair seemed more fragrant when she knelt beside him to examine the wound in his shoulder.

"Just a crease," he told her. "I'll be good as new when you loosen that cinch strap on the sorrel. My spur got tangled in the webbin'."

Almost at once then Benteen was free of the dead horse, was standing up and gingerly testing his numb right leg. Returning circulation needled it with prickling darts and he guessed he had chafed some hide off his ankle during the long struggle. But he was free. Miraculously, gloriously free!

He loosed a gusty sigh.

"Old Dame Fortune had her arm around me again!" he said. He shook his head and looked at her in baffled wonderment. "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd have to thank you for savin' my bacon."

That seemed to displease Jane. "You don't need to thank me, Clark," she said. "I'd do as much for a dog." She glanced at Halliday's sprawled form. "Is he dead?" she asked.

"Not quite, but he's lost a lot of blood."

Jane shrugged wearily. "He's not the only one. Four of our riders are dead, two others wounded. And Dad is in bed with a bullet-hole in his side. But Brett Nedrow is siding the Rafter B now, and we've still got a chance if Marshal Halliday arrives in time to arrest the Texas outlaws who are riding for Pike Kirby."

That surprised Benteen. "Did your father send for Hawk Halliday?" he asked.

Jane nodded. "Hawk used to be our foreman a long time ago. When Dad discovered that Kirby was importing wanted men to fight against us, he sent word to Marshal Halliday, hoping he'd get here before the fighting started. But something must have happened to him."

"Yes," Benteen said soberly. "Something did it." Then he pointed to the sprawled shape on the ground. "That's Hawk Halliday."

For a moment Jane stared at Benteen as if she didn't believe him.

"Then you were riding north with Hawk?" she asked, a queerly eager note in her voice. "You and Halliday were riding together?"

Benteen nodded, and Jane—*smiled.* That didn't make sense to Clark Benteen, for she rushed over to Halliday and knelt beside him and said sorrowfully:

"Poor old Hawk! What have they done to you?"

Wholly confused, Benteen watched Jane use her neck scarf to wipe blood from Halliday's forehead. She had rejected his thanks. She had said she would do as much for a dog. But then, learning that he was riding with Hawk Halliday, she had smiled at him. Why had that pleased her?

"We must get Hawk to the ranch quickly, Clark," Jane announced. "Doc Medwick is there. He'll save Hawk if anyone can."

"Sure," Benteen agreed, but now he regretted fashioning the tourniquet around the lawman's leg. Except for that, Hawk might have bled to death and there would be no fear of a killer charge in the future.

Presently Benteen had hoisted the old

lawman across Jane's saddle.

"I'm so glad Hawk brought you with him," she said. "You can do what he would've done."

SO THAT was it!

That was why Jane had smiled. She thought he was a deputy marshal, and that Halliday had brought him along to help round up the wanted outlaws on Pike Kirby's pay-roll. What a joke that was! What a left-handed, senseless joke. He, a gun-runner who had been handcuffed and accused of killing a man, being mistaken for a deputy marshal!

The monstrous irony of it formed a cynical smile on Clark Benteen's hunger-gaunted face. But Jane didn't see it, for she was leading the black out of the pass.

"I'm so glad Hawk brought you with him, Clark!" she was saying again.

As they walked toward the ranch, Jane told him all about the trouble, how Pike Kirby had kept putting pressure on her father, little by little, until old Jeff had no longer been able to stand it.

"You were right," she admitted frankly. "I know it now, and so does Dad. But we—well, Clark, it seemed so fantastic three years ago. We just couldn't believe any man would do what Pike Kirby has done. What you warned us he would do."

"Did the old crew stick with Jeff?" Benteen asked, recalling the names of men who had taken their riding orders from him in the old days.

"Most of them," Jane said. "But they've been outnumbered all along, even before what happened yesterday. It was awful, Clark! Awful!"

It was dusk when they reached the flats just south of the Rafter B yard. A rider whom Benteen recognized as "Baldy" Hackmire drifted out of the shadows near the fence.

"We was gettin' tol'able worried about you, ma'am," he said.

He peered at Halliday's saddle-draped form.

"It's Hawk," Jane said. "They dry-gulched him over in the pass. But he's still alive. Did Brett get back from town all right?"

"Yeah, he drove in an hour ago with a wagonload of provisions and plenty ammunition," Baldy reported. "Now all we need is a new crew."

The old rider took a closer look at Benteen. "Why, if it ain't Clark!" he exclaimed. He shook hands in friendly fashion. "If Jeff had of took your advice three years ago, Clark, we wouldn't be in this awful fix now."

As he spoke, a blocky, bland-faced young man galloped up and hastily dismounted.

"I was just starting out to look for you, Janey!" he cried.

The almost possessive tone of his voice stirred a swift sense of resentment in Benteen. Who was this smooth-talking galoot? Must be some Johnny-come-lately in Travaho Basin. But he had been here long enough to fall in love with Jane. Clark could tell that by the way the fellow looked at her. He acted as if she was his personal property.

Jane introduced them. "Brett is running the fight against the PK," she said, "and using his own money to do it."

"So?"

Benteen disliked the bland friendliness of the man who shook his hand energetically. Brett Nedrow might be siding the Rafter B, running the fight against Kirby, as Jane said, but it was Jane herself he was fighting for, not the ranch. And, judging by the cheerful confidence of Nedrow's manner, he had won what he was after.

They went on toward the house with Nedrow walking beside Jane.

"Clark came with Marshal Halliday to help arrest Blackjack Chisum and those other wanted men on Kirby's pay-roll," she said.

The irony of that brought a cynical smile to Benteen's face. Arrest, huh! He would be a wanted man himself as soon as Marshal Halliday regained consciousness long enough to tell what he knew, or thought he knew. And that,

Benteen supposed, would be the first thing the badge-toter would talk about. Hawk would want to know about his prisoner.

V

RAFTER B's lamplit windows were near now. And although it was too dark for Benteen to distinguish more than the looming outline of house and barn and bunkhouse, he knew exactly how this place looked. There was a giant cottonwood tree close by the front gallery. He had heard its restless sighing many a moonlight night when he had sat with Jane while old Jeff played checkers with the boys in the bunkhouse. But now there was just darkness, and the murmur of Brett Nedrow's voice telling Jane about his trip to town, explaining why it had taken so long.

Again Benteen felt a smoldering resentment. He tried to tell himself that it wasn't jealousy, that he had discarded all his romantic notions three years ago. But deep inside he knew that no other girl would ever mean what Jane had meant to him. And knew he would have no chance at all with her when his marshal masquerade was revealed. He couldn't even stay on here as a rider, unless Halliday happened to die without regaining consciousness.

The wounded lawman gave a low moan. Steadying him, Benteen noticed the silver badge pinned to the inside of Halliday's open vest. It reminded Benteen of Jane's swift smile when she had thought he was also wearing a marshal's badge, and of how abruptly that false impression had given her hope. All the way in from the pass he had tried to find the proper words to tell her the truth, to explain why he would have to leave Travaho Basin *muy pronto*. But the right words hadn't come, and now it was too late.

But as they reached the house and Jane hurried ahead to make preparations for Halliday, an idea came to Benteen. A loco, reckless scheme took shape abruptly and he thought that it might work. It just might.

Quickly he removed Halliday's badge and slipped it into his own pants pocket. If Hawk didn't come out of his coma too soon there might be a chance of doing what Jane wanted done, before a penniless renegade headed south again.

A marshal's badge might make the difference.

Benteen was thinking about that when Nedrow helped him carry Halliday up the gallery steps. He had been away from this country for three years. How were folks to know he hadn't become a deputy marshal? They would find out in time, of course, but it wouldn't take long to do what he had in mind. Win or lose, the deal would be over in a day or two. A week at the most. And after that it didn't make a bit of difference what they knew.

Except Jane. Benteen frowned, thinking how it would be with her when she learned about his masquerade.

"So you're a deputy marshal," Nedrow said as they reached the top of the gallery steps.

It wasn't a question exactly. It was more as if Nedrow was thinking out loud, as if he were a trifle puzzled.

* * * * *

There was a worried frown on Sheriff "Pinky" Weaver's florid face as he stood at Dutch Orondorff's Palace bar absently holding a glass of beer. Never an industrious man, Weaver had sold his homestead in the Tailholt Hills upon being elected sheriff.

"Town life will suit me just fine," he had said, and had celebrated his election by purchasing a fancy broadcloth suit, new bench-made boots and a pearl-gray Stetson, the like of which no rancher had ever worn in Travaho Basin.

"I'm goin' to live high off the hog for a change," he had announced.

Moving into a front room at the Alhambra Hotel, he had been as happy as a horse in a clover patch. But now, listening to Dutch Orondorff's rasping

voice, Pinky Weaver wasn't happy at all.

"It iss an outrage," Orondorff declared, propping his huge stomach on the bar's beveled edge and emphasizing his pronouncement by gesturing with a wet bar rag. "You are the sheriff. You wear the badge. But you are lettin' Texas outlaws kill Rafter B cowboys every day and do not lift a hand. It iss an outrage!"

SHERIFF WEAVER wiped his perspiring face.

"If them Texans was rustlin' cattle or robbin' banks I'd go after 'em quick, Dutch," he said dejectedly. "But they ain't. They're workin' at the PK. They're all on Pike Kirby's pay-roll, just like them men at the Rafter B are on Belmont's pay-roll. They're hired hands, Dutch."

"They're outlaws!" Orondorff insisted. "Just because they're bein' paid by Pike Kirby don't change that!"

Weaver shrugged. "Maybe so, but they ain't outlawin' now. They're workin' for wages."

"*Workin'!*" Orondorff exclaimed, smearing the word with contempt. "Do you call it work when men spend most of their time in town and the rest of it shootin' at Belmont cowboys? How many calves haff those workers branded? How many cattle haff they gathered? And you call it workin'!"

"Well, then, they're fightin' for Kirby," Weaver conceded. "But I've got no way of stoppin' a range war. You didn't see no sheriff stoppin' the Murphy-Chisum feud in New Mexico, did you, Dutch? This is the same thing, and I can't do nothin' about the fightin'. It's between Belmont and Kirby."

"But Pike had no right to bring such killers into this country," the saloonman argued stubbornly. "He iss not fightin' a fair fight against Jeff Belmont, hiring such men. They are killers, not cowboys, and you should run them out of here. You are the sheriff."

"How can I?" Weaver demanded. "I got no deputies. One man can't run off a whole Wild Bunch by hisself."

Orondorff snorted disgustedly. "You could swear in some deputies, if you'd try."

Clark Benteen eased through the Palace batwings.

"Clark—you haff come back!" Dutch Orondorff exclaimed.

Benteen grinned and shook hands with Orondorff, who promptly produced his private bottle of bourbon.

"It hass been a long time since you went away," Dutch said happily. "It iss good you are back."

Sheriff Weaver also shook hands. Benteen said, "So you quit ranchin' to wear a star, eh, Pinky?"

"Yes, and I think maybe it was a mistake," Weaver muttered. "Badge-totin' can get downright troublesome at times. Like now, with a damn range war goin' on and everybody tryin' to tell me what to do. It's enough to give a man the runnin' fits."

Benteen chuckled. And because this was the first test of a plan that had occurred to him last night at the Rafter B, he forced a comradely tone.

"Yes, Pinky," he said. "I've found it that way too."

Then, as Ordondorff and Weaver gawked at him in surprise, Benteen took a silver badge from his pants pocket and let them look at it.

"Deputy U. S. marshal!" Weaver blurted.

"You haff come lookin' for some Texas killers, yess?" Dutch asked quickly, eagerly.

"Yes," Benteen agreed. "I hear there's a bunch of Federal noose-dodgers hidin' out around here."

"Goot!" Orondorff exclaimed. "Goot for you Clark!" Then, with a disdainful glance at Weaver, the saloonman said, "They are not hidin', Clark. *He* iss the one who iss hidin."

That brought a brighter shine to Weaver's flushed cheeks, and he hastily explained why he could take no sides in the Belmont-Kirby fight. It was, Benteen understood, a timid man's alibi for keeping a promise to the outfit which

had helped him win an election. There was nothing odd about such a situation. It was common in cattle-land. But because Benteen's rash plan would have little chance for ultimate success without Weaver's cooperation, he offered no criticism of Pinky's failure to do his duty.

In fact, Benteen seemed to agree with the worried sheriff, for he said:

"I can see where this deal has put you smack-dab in the middle, Pinky. A man in your position has to be careful what he does."

He had downed his drink, but Dutch had refused to take his money.

"Of course I wouldn't ask you to help me corral these Texas owlhoots, Pinky," Benteen said. "But I might need the use of your jail for a few days. How many cells you got vacant?"

"Six of 'em," Weaver reported, plainly pleased that he wasn't being asked to aid in making arrests. "I sure couldn't refuse to let a Federal officer have the use of our jail."

"That's fine," Benteen said, and patted Weaver's shoulder. Then he added casually, "No need for me to fret about you losin' a prisoner, once he's in your custody. You'd keep him in that jail, come hell or high water, wouldn't you, Pinky?"

WEAVER gulped. This was more than he had bargained for. Pike Kirby wouldn't take kindly to having his riders behind bars. Not only that, but there was a good chance the PK crew might try to raid the jail. That would put Pinky in a bad fix. There was only one way a sheriff could break up an attempted jail delivery. With a gun. And he would have to do more than threaten a bunch like those Texas gunfighters. He would have to shoot.

Weaver seemed on the verge of refusing to accept such an unexpected responsibility when Dutch Orondorff declared:

"That iss one thing you *will* do, Pinky Weaver. You haff said the fight between Kirby and Belmont iss not your business, and so you do nothin' to stop it. But runnin' the jail iss your business. It iss a duty you cannot dodge!"

Sheriff Weaver gulped again. "I'll guard the jail, come hell or high water," he said without enthusiasim.

During Benteen's first two hours in Travaho he shook hands with a dozen men, including Silas Morgan, who owned the mercantile, Ed Jackson, proprietor of the livery stable and "Dude" Shannon, the hotelkeeper. All of them were friendly, yet all seemed reluctant to discuss the Kirby-Belmont fight.

"Just somethin' that had to happen," was the way Silas Morgan expressed it. "I disliked to cut off Jeff's credit, knowin' how much he needed provisions, but I had no choice."

"Why?" Benteen demanded. "Why didn't you have a choice?"

"I've got to do business with the Travaho Bank, or go out of business," the old merchant explained. "Pike Kirby owns the controllin' interest in our bank now, and the bank holds mortgages on nearly every business in town. We've been friends with old Jeff for a long time, but we can't cut our own throats to help him now."

That, Benteen understood, was why none of these men had brought pressure to bear against Sheriff Weaver. Even though their sympathies were with Jeff Belmont they had to remain neutral or be squeezed out of business by Kirby's bank. It also explained Jane's remark about Brett Nedrow using his own money to run the fight against the PK. A bad situation.

Some little time later, as Benteen sat at the front window of his hotel room and watched Main Street, he wondered if Hawk Halliday had regained consciousness by now. Doc Medwick had diagnosed the lawman's head wound as concussion.

"He might wake up in an hour, or a week," the doctor had said. "But he will make it."

And Jeff Belmont, sitting up in bed

with his bullet-broken ribs tightly strapped, had exclaimed:

"You can't kill a tough old rooster by bouncing bullets off his noggin. Hawk'll be up and at 'em in no time at all!"

Benteen shrugged. There was nothing he could do about it. Sooner or later, depending upon Halliday's recovery, he would be exposed as a fake marshal. But in the meantime perhaps he could accomplish something to remember. Something for Jane to remember also.

Remembering all he had seen and heard at the Rafter B the night before, Benteen frowned. There didn't seem to be much chance of stopping Kirby, no matter how well this scheme turned out. Baldy Hackmire was the only able-bodied member remaining of Jeff Belmont's crew. He and Nedrow took turns standing guard against a surprise attack, while Jane and Doc Medwick cared for five wounded men. And everyone, including Jane, seemed to think Brett Nedrow was a brass-riveted hero because he had abandoned his two-bit horse camp to join the Rafter B.

"Brett believes in fair play," Jane had said, bragging about Nedrow's help. "He has offered to spend every dollar he owns to help the Rafter B survive this awful thing."

Well, who wouldn't, if the spending gave him a chance to win a girl like Jane Belmont?

Nedrow, Benteen believed, didn't give a hoot about fair play. He looked like a romancer, and he acted like one.

"Just butterin' his bread on the right side," Benteen muttered.

There was more to it than fair play; a lot more. There was a pair of smoke-blue eyes and sweet, curving lips; there was the shapely image of a man's campfire dreams. Brett Nedrow might have other reasons for siding the Rafter B, but Jane was reason enough.

VI

PATIENTLY watching the street, Benteen wondered how soon the PK crew would show in town. This was Saturday and Dutch Orondorff had informed him that Kirby's riders began drifting in during the afternoon, a couple at a time.

"Blackjack Chisum and Tex Hood usually come in together," Dutch had reported. "They're both wanted for mail robbery in Texas, and so iss Sam Gannon. The other one you should grab is called Cherokee Slim."

A thin and mirthless smile quirked

Benteen's lips as he recalled the last time he'd seen those four killers. They had been drinking *pulque* in a *cantina* ten miles below the Border. Suspecting his gun-running activities they had set a bushwhack trap for him when he left town. But because they had been too drunk for accurate shooting he had escaped without a scratch.

NOW *he* was setting a trap, and he wasn't drunk. He would be stark sober when he sprang it.

Benteen glanced at the big clock atop the courthouse. Twenty minutes past one. Still early. He took out his Walker Model Colt and examined its loads, then sat in moody reflection. For a man who had once been accused of having an itchy trigger finger he had done mighty little shooting during the past couple of days. He had been wounded, arrested at gunpoint and had a horse shot from under him without once firing a shot. And he had lost fifteen hundred dollars in gold without ever seeing the man who grabbed it.

Worden, he supposed, was having himself a big spree in Tombstone about now. The back-shooting son would be giving the tinhorns and the dance hall girls a chance to slick-finger him out of another man's stake.

For a time then, with the urge to find Worden forming a strong impulse in him, Benteen considered discarding this marshal masquerade. Even if his scheme was successful he had nothing to win here. Brett Nedrow had the inside track with Jane, and would continue to have it, no matter how the range war ended. She thought he was a bright knight in shining armor, a fair-minded knight who could do no wrong.

So why should he, Benteen, risk his hide in a fool deal?

He had nothing to win by staying. And everything to lose. If he wasn't shot down he would probably end up in Yuma prison, or swing from a gallows for a killing he hadn't done. A man would be a fool to risk that.

Benteen slid his gun into holster, put on his hat and strode out into the hallway. Going downstairs he remembered abruptly that Jane had saved him in the pass. He recalled how she had said, "You don't need to thank me. I'd do as much for a dog."

He shrugged and sauntered out to the veranda. Even a dog wouldn't run out on a debt like that. The payoff here might cost him more than his chance of finding Worden. Much more. But he had to make it. He had to pay the debt he owed Jane Belmont, even though he could never have her.

There was just one way he could do that—by cutting down the odds against Baldy Hackmire and Brett Nedrow.

He was pinning Halliday's badge on his shirt when he saw three riders turn into Main Street. Peering at those indolent, slow-moving shapes, he identified them instantly—Red Stambaugh, "Blackjack" Chisum and "Tex" Hood!

Casually, in the unhurried fashion of a man having no definite goal, Clark Benteen crossed Main Street's wide dust and stepped up to the Palace Saloon stoop. There had been a time when the pressure of impending violence would have flustered him, a time when the sure knowledge of a gunsmoke showdown would have tangled his thinking and tightened his muscles.

But the smoky years had taught him the futility of fear. They had given him a gunman's nerveless calculation and conditioned him, so that now he leaned indolently against an awning post in such a way that there was no sunlight in his eyes.

A mere detail, that; a seemingly insignificant detail. But the difference between living and dying often depended upon such trivial things.

Stambaugh, Chisum and Hood were riding abreast, coming along the street at a jog trot. The PK's red-headed foreman was slicked up in his Sunday shirt and ice-cream-colored sombrero. He called a greeting to Goldie Miller, a sparkling-eyed waitress who stood in the Grand Café doorway. Chisum and Hood also favored Goldie with ogling

glances, and as she boldly smiled back at them, Benteen thought they would pull up in front of the restaurant.

"Curse a fancy-faced female for messin' things up," he muttered.

IF THOSE riders stopped there he would have to stage this deal all over. And he might not have the sun's slanting rays in his favor. But the grinning, gun-hung three didn't stop. They came on toward the saloon hitchrack.

"She sure likes her sweetenin', that Goldie," he heard Stambaugh brag. "She goes for me like a fly to sugar."

Benteen watched them dismount. They were, he reflected, a tough trio. Chisum, black-bearded and gotch-eared; Tex Hood, who had once been a professional gambler and still wore a tinhorn's garb; and Red Stambaugh who had a kill-crazy streak. As tough a trio as a man would meet north or south of the Border.

Remembering how close Stambaugh had come to killing him yesterday, and how easily the redhead could have finished off a helpless, handcuffed prisoner, Benteen laughed a little. Red hadn't got close enough to recognize him in the pass, but he would now.

As if in echo, Stambaugh exclaimed:

"When did you get back, Benteen?"

"A little while ago," Benteen said with apparent disinterest.

Stambaugh peered at the badge. "What's that tin on your shirt stand for?"

"Deputy U. S. marshal."

Blackjack Chisum held up a hand to shade his sun-dazzled eyes. "You—a law-dog?" he exclaimed.

"Aw, he must of stole that badge," Tex Hood scoffed, "or found it on a trash pile. He ain't no more a U. S. marshal than I am."

For a moment they just stood there gawking up at him. Then Chisum said:

"I'll buy you a drink, Benteen, badge or no badge. I ain't proud, one way nor the other."

"But I am," Benteen said, his voice showing no sign of the tension inside him. "I'm real particular who I drink with."

The insult registered in Chisum's black eyes, making them glint.

"You funnin'?" he demanded. "Or do you mean it like it sounds?"

"Just like it sounds," Benteen announced.

Then, with a fluid smoothness that made the motion seem deliberate, he drew his gun.

"You're under arrest—all three of you!" he announced.

For a hushed moment they stared at the gun in speechless astonishment.

"What the hell is this, Benteen?" Stambaugh demanded then. "Why you pointin' that gun at us?"

"I'm arrestin' you for shootin' Marshal Hawk Halliday," Benteen said quietly. "I was with Hawk at the time—up there in that pass south of Rafter B. Remember?"

Stambaugh's mouth sagged open. "Was that you?" he blurted. "Me and Pike thought it was Belmont riders."

"A hell of a way for white men to fight," Benteen accused. "Sneakin' around like half-breed Apaches and shootin' men without knowin' who they are."

Ignoring the angry flush that stained Stambaugh's roan face a deeper hue, Benteen shifted his glance to Tex Hood's slyly inching right hand.

"All right, Tex, if you feel lucky," he said. "Otherwise hoist your hands up where I can watch 'em."

Hood's sun-squinted eyes glinted wickedly. His lips went thin, but he raised his hands shoulder high. And at this exact instant Red Stambaugh's splayed fingers darted to holster. He had his gun half-drawn when Benteen fired. The bullet clipped a corner of Stambaugh's shirt pocket, knocked him back against the hitchrail. He made a teetering turn and collapsed with his body half over the hitchrail, spooking the three horses into rearing confusion.

While Benteen kept a strict watch on

Chisum and Hood, a woman's high-pitched scream lanced along the street.

"That'll be Goldie," Benteen thought, and felt a swift sense of dread. For although Stambaugh wasn't worth a tear from any girl's eyes, Goldie might weep over him, might turn this deal into a spectacle of romantic grief. But none of that worry showed in Benteen's gruff voice.

"Make up your mind, Blackjack," he said. "Draw or hoist."

Chisum peered at Stambaugh's grotesquely suspended body and muttered, "Deader'n a barbecued beef." Then he raised his hands.

A tight, tough grin slanted across Benteen's cheeks. This was progressing perfectly.

A CROWD converged on the saloon. Sheriff Weaver came from the barbership with one side of his face whitely lathered by shaving soap.

"What's up?" he demanded, peering at Stambaugh's swaying body.

Silas Morgan called something from across the street, then Dutch Orondorff rushed through the saloon's batwing doors.

"It iss a thing to see, Clark—a great thing!" he was explaining.

But Benteen wasn't listening. He was watching Goldie Miller rush up to the hitchrack.

"Red," she cried. "Red, honey!"

Then she looked at Benteen.

"It was him, or me," he said.

She didn't speak. She just stared up at him, her eyes dark against the sudden pallor of her face, dark and dry and hot with hate.

Benteen shrugged. He waggled his gun at Chisum and Hood.

"Head for jail, you sashay sports," he ordered, and followed them through the morbidly watching crowd.

"Wait till Pike Kirby hears about this!" a man called.

"There'll be hell to pay!" another man exclaimed.

There already was for Sheriff Weaver, who paced his office like a man at wits end.

"You'd better turn us loose before Pike and the boys get here, Pinky!" Blackjack Chisum called when he passed the cell corridor. "Otherwise they'll take this jail apart—and you with it!"

Weaver wiped perspiration from his forehead. He went to the doorway and peered worriedly along Main Street. Then he glanced at Benteen. "I ain't sorry you killed Stambaugh," he said, "him takin' Goldie Miller away from me like he done. Red was a no-good smart-alecky son if ever I saw one. But Pike'll go hog wild when he hears about it. Him and Red was thicker'n bugs in a bunkhouse."

Benteen shrugged and shaped up a smoke. "I'll take care of Kirby when the time comes," he said. "All you've got to do is sit tight in here while I dehorn Cherokee Slim and Sam Gannon. I'm planning' to come up behind them while they're trying to bust in here. So if you do any shootin' be sure I'm not a target."

"Shootin'?" Weaver objected. "Where'd I get off if it come to shootin'?"

Benteen nodded at the silver star on Weaver's vest. "You're the sheriff," he said quietly. "It's your sworn duty to uphold law and order."

He was on the point of leaving the jail office when Pinky said:

"Wait until I go get me a drink. I sure need it."

Benteen grinned. Weaver, he guessed, was wishing he had never won the election. The dude-dressed lawman was wanting a place to hide. As Weaver started out the doorway, Benteen asked:

"You sure Kirby and the others will come to town this evenin'?"

"Sure, and that's why I need a drink," Weaver declared, and hurried on out.

VII

CLARK BENTEEN stood in the doorway of the sheriff's office, warily watching Main Street. No telling just when the rest of the PK crew would arrive,

nor how they would come. If they all rode in together this would be difficult to handle. But he hoped they would come soon. Waiting was bad. It got on a man's nerves and gave him time to think about too many things.

He watched Pinky Weaver start past the Grand Café, and stop. Goldie Miller stood in the doorway. Benteen couldn't hear what she said, but he saw her smile at Pinky and lay a hand on his arm. A natural-born flirt, Benteen reflected, and swore softly as Weaver went into the cafe. For the success or failure of his scheme depended upon Weaver being here when the PK bunch arrived. It would be like Goldie to keep Weaver away from the jail just for spite. Remembering the look she had given him, Benteen, he frowned. That waitress hated him.

Benteen tossed his cigarette out into the dust. He observed two small boys who were peeking in a side window at Garrett's Undertaking Parlor where Red Stambaugh, a dead gunfighter, had been carried. Unless Clark Benteen had some luck, those bug-eyed lads might be peering at him the same way.

Main Street was almost deserted now, and that seemed odd. For it was almost sundown, and this was Saturday. Benteen's gaze lifted to the hazy, shadowed slopes of the Tailholt Hills northwest of town where he had planned to stake his homestead. There was timber up there to build a house as well as grass and water for a small herd of cattle. Remembering how he had intended to buy good breeder stock and raise high-grade beef, Benteen became morose. There was but one way he could make that dream come true—by finishing this job in a hurry and finding Worden before the ambusher squandered those double-eagles.

He wondered again if Hawk Halliday had come out of his coma. It was certain that the lawman would head for town the minute he was able to ride. He would come looking for the prisoner who had stolen his badge.

The west-bound stage clattered into town, its wheels churning up a high banner of dust. Benteen saw it stop in front of the Wells Fargo office next door to the Alhambra Hotel. The driver threw down two mail sacks. Banteen thought: "If I took that stage now I'd be in Tombstone by midnight."

For the second time this day he had to force down a prodding urge to leave Travaho, had to shackle his impatience because of a blonde girl who had saved him from becoming buzzard bait. A proud girl who had bragged about Brett Nedrow's heroic qualities.

And now, as Benteen stood there watching the street, he saw something that made him bitter. Sheriff Weaver and Goldie Miller, each carrying a valise, hurried down the hotel steps and climbed into the stage-coach just as the driver kicked off his brake! He hadn't even seen them leave the café where she worked.

"The yellow dog!" Benteen muttered. "The romancin' yellow dog!"

As the stage rolled down Main Street Benteen understood exactly how Goldie had out-maneuvered him. She had probably tried to talk Pinky into giving up his prisoners when the PK bunch arrived, and when that had failed she had used her woman's wiles to lure Weaver into leaving town with her. It hadn't been difficult, Benteen supposed, recalling that Pinky admitted he'd had his eyes on the waitress. Anyway, Weaver had most likely jumped at the chance to duck the showdown with Pike Kirby, a showdown he had been dreading with a coward's gnawing fear.

Benteen turned back into the jail office in the solemn way of a man facing almost certain failure. The set-up had been chancy enough at best, but now, with Weaver gone, it seemed hopeless.

With that slogging sense of futility crawling through him, Benteen took stock of the situation. A scattergun and a Winchester were racked above Pinky's desk, and the cell key-ring hung from a nail on the wall. One man, he supposed,

could hold out here indefinitely against a siege. But he couldn't make additional arrests on the outside. And that was the important thing!

"Damn Pinky Weaver," Benteen muttered, for he knew that his efforts to corral all of Kirby's outlaw gunfighters had been ruined.

It was at this moment that he heard footsteps behind him.

Whirling instantly, he drew his gun—and saw Brett Nedrow in the doorway.

"Don't sneak up on a man like that!" he snarled.

ON NEDROW'S blandly handsome face was only smiling amusement.

"On edge, aren't you, Benteen?" he said smoothly and perched on a corner of Weaver's desk. "Dutch Orondorff tells me you've cut down Kirby's crew by three, including his foreman."

Benteen holstered his gun, went to the door and gave Main Street a questing glance.

"How are things at Rafter B?" he asked, as he turned back.

"Fine," Nedrow declared. "Thanks to me there's plenty of grub, and guns enough to stand off a troop of cavalry." He chuckled, and built a cigarette. "I bought out the mercantile's entire stock of ammunition and dynamite yesterday. If the PK runs short of bullets they'll have to go all the way to Tomstone for 'em, and if they try to raid the Rafter B they'll be blown sky high as they cross the yard. I've got dynamite planted on fifty-foot fuses all over the place."

He was a braggart from who hid the broom, Benteen thought. No wonder Jane and the others considered Nedrow a brass-riveted hero. But even so, Benteen grudgingly gave him credit for rescuing the Rafter B from an intolerable situation. Without food, ammunition or a crew of riders, the ranch had been doomed to destruction until this brash man had intervened.

"Did Halliday wake up?" Benteen asked.

Nedrow nodded. He glanced at the badge on Benteen's shirt. "Hawk didn't say much," he said slyly, "but he seemed surprised when Jane told him what you were plannin' to do. He said you'd never get away with it."

"So," Benteen thought, wondering how much this smooth-talking horse rancher knew and how much he suspected.

"Jane got to worryin' after Hawk said that," Nedrow went on. "She said you were such a gunsmoke galoot you'd tackle the whole PK crew single-handed, in which case you'd need help. So she asked me to give you a hand with your badge-toter chores until Hawk is able to ride."

A humorless, mocking smile quirked Benteen's lips. Jane, he supposed, hadn't changed her opinion of him. She still thought he was just a fiddle-footed drifter with a wild streak in him, an itchy-fingered gunfighter wanting to show off. And she always would.

Briefly then, Benteen told Nedrow about his plan for arresting Gannon and "Cherokee Slim," and how the scheme had been wrecked by Sheriff Weaver's desertion.

"My idea was to wait until dark," he said, "then try to grab those two quietly, one at a time, and bring 'em in the back door of the jail. With that done we'd have the toughest half of Kirby's crew under lock and key, and could stand off the rest."

"Sounds smart," Nedrow admitted. "But how about the back door? Suppose they make a try at breakin' in there also?"

Benteen shook his head. The back door is iron, and I've got the only key. They'll gang up at the wooden door here in front, which means we've got a good chance to outsmart 'em—if you'll take over Weaver's chores."

Nedrow smiled. "Jane said for me to be real careful and not get myself hurt," he said blandly, as if savoring a fond recollection of his departure from the Rafter B. "But I'll give you a hand."

He reached for the scattergun, ex-

amined its double loads and followed Benteen to the doorway.

"You used to think a lot of Jane yourself, didn't you?" he asked.

That deliberately taunting question roused swift resentment in Clark Benteen. It was like salt rubbed into the raw of his discarded dreams. Brett Nedrow was gloating, too, in the way of a man who got what he wanted, and took full credit for getting it.

But there was no sign of anger in Benteen's voice as he said:

"Yes, quite a lot. But that was a long time ago."

He went out into the sunless street.

Benteen ate supper at the Grand Café.

"Goldie Miller wouldn't of run off with Weaver if you hadn't killed Red Stambaugh," the glum proprietor complained. "Now I got no waitress."

After he had eaten, Benteen went into the back alley and followed it to an opening between two buildings directly opposite the jail. Here he waited, keeping a patient watch on the street.

DAYLIGHT faded. Twilight lingered briefly, then full darkness came. Main Street was empty of traffic, showing no sign of movement against yellow shafts of lamplight which slanted across the dust. It was a brooding emptiness that gnawed at a man's nerves and greased the palms of his hands with perspiration.

Benteen smoked three cigarettes, taking care to shield the glowing tips during each smoke. No use revealing his presence here. Some citizen might choose to inform Kirby. Everyone on Main Street knew there would be a showdown when the PK boss arrived. They were waiting and listening, wanting no part of the impending conflict. But, except for Brett, no one knew exactly how the showdown was rigged.

Glancing at the jail office, Benteen grinned. There was no light, which meant that Jane's bragging boy friend was also waiting this out in darkness. Recalling what the blocky-faced horse rancher had said about her asking him to be careful, Benteen wondered if she had kissed Brett good-by. He supposed she had. He was thinking about that when he heard hoof beats. The PK crew were coming into town, he thought instantly.

Almost at once five riders jogged into Main Street, their saddle-slouched figures showing plainly as they passed the livery stable's lantern-lit doorway. Two of them were strangers to Benteen, but he recognized the other three—Kirby, Gannon, and Cherokee Slim. The five men dismounted at the Palace Saloon hitchrack and were starting up the stoop when a man hurried from the mercantile and spoke to Pike Kirby.

Benteen could guess what he was saying—and what Kirby would be thinking. He watched those five riders turn toward the jail and knew that the waiting was almost over. He nudged his gun loose in its holster as Kirby led his men to the darkened doorway of the sheriff's office.

"Benteen, come out of there or we'll smoke you out!" Kirby shouted.

For a moment there was silence. Then Brett Nedrow's voice, muffled by the closed door, came faintly:

"Smoke and be damned to you!"

It occurred to Benteen that the PK bunch might think that was his voice, not knowing the setup. And if that were so, Pinky Weaver's desertion might prove to be a benefit. For if Kirby thought that he, Benteen, was in the jail, there would be a much better chance of getting Gannon and Cherokee. There might even be an opportunity to grab Pike Kirby himself!

Benteen peered at the hastily deploying shapes in front of him. Except for a faint shaft of light from the mercantile's front windows, the street here was shrouded in mealy darkness. He heard the PK boss give an order, and was calculating Kirby's position when guns began blasting—one so near that its muzzle flare gave him a fleeting glimpse of Sam Gannon's pock-pitted

face. Gannon was forted up behind a rainwater barrel on this side of the street!

Benteen stepped warily out to the sidewalk, moved up behind Gannon and jabbed his gun into the Texan's back.

"Keep quiet or I'll blow your backbone right through you!" he commanded.

Then, keeping the gun's muzzle hard pressed against Gannon's shirt, Benteen reached around and snatched the gun from Sam's fingers. Then he hastily handcuffed him.

"What the devil is this?" Gannon demanded as Benteen prodded him back between the buildings.

"An arrest," Benteen said with savage satisfaction and hurried his prisoner around to the jail's rear entrance while guns continued their steady blasting in the street.

If he could get back there soon enough there would be still another prisoner for Nedrow to guard!

VIII

WITH the iron door unlocked, Benteen was herding Gannon inside when a shadowy shape rushed up.

"Who's that?" a harsh voice demanded, and as Benteen pushed his manacled prisoner ahead of him, Blackjack Chisum yelled from his cell:

"Grab that door! Hold it open!"

Benteen whirled and fired, and reached for the door. But he was too late. A gun exploded so close to his face it's flare blinded him; so close he felt the concussion instead of hearing it. But he heard Sam Gannon's yelp of pain and knew the slug had hit his prisoner. Ducking hastily along the cell corridor he collided with Gannon, then pushed the staggering gunhawk on into the jail office.

"That you, Benteen?" Nedrow called nervously.

"Yes, and we'll soon have company," Benteen shouted. "More company than we'll know what to do with!"

"What you mean?" Nedrow demanded.

"The back door is open."

Nedrow cursed. "They've got us trapped!" he cried.

But with his last word his voice was lost in a racketing roar of guns from the back of the jail, bullets plunking into the wall above Weaver's desk. Benteen dropped to the floor, eased over to the cell-block doorway. He slammed two fast shots into the corridor and felt the sharp sting of wood splinters clawing his cheek as slugs ripped into the door frame an inch from his face.

Then, as he changed positions for another shot, Brett Nedrow knelt beside him.

"They're all at the back now!" he whispered excitedly. "We can slip out the front door and make a run for it."

"I've got three prisoners," Benteen snarled, "and I'm keeping them!"

"You're loco," Nedrow muttered. "Plumb loco!"

Benteen ignored him. He fired and moved and fired again. Two men, he thought, might still be able to hold out here. Even with PK riders controlling the cell corridor they couldn't free Chisum and Hood without the keys.

Then he felt a draft of cool air. Understanding what it meant, he muttered, "Another romancin' yellow dog."

Brett Nedrow was leaving.

Grimly preparing for a final stand, Benteen barred the front door, then started across the dark office toward the gun rack above Weaver's desk. He would be directly in the line of fire from the corridor, but if he could obtain the scattergun it would be worth the risk.

A slug whined wickedly over Benteen's head as he leaped to the desk and crouched behind it. The firing now seemed deliberately spaced, coming in single gunblasts that were hugely magnified by the jail's stone walls. And each bullet was high. It was as if the PK riders knew that he was trying to reach the sheriff's scattergun, yet they couldn't have seen him.

Benteen waited. Powdersmoke's acrid stench smarted his eyes and fouled his

nostrils. The only windows in this place —small, barred squares high up on the walls—were unbroken, so there was no outlet for foggy wreaths of gunsmoke that became thicker as the shooting continued.

Benteen raised his head high enough to peer into the clotted blackness of the corridor. Kirby, he guessed, had closed the iron door at the rear so he and his riders wouldn't be outlined against the lesser darkness outside. Recalling how the PK boss had gazed calmly at two drygulched men in the pass, Benteen began an impatient search for the gunrack. A double-barreled charge of slugs right now might turn the dark corridor into a slaughter chute, might end the Belmont-Kirby war once and for all!

A bullet whanged past Benteen, head high, its brief, broken hiss causing him to dodge instinctively. He thought, "It's the bullet you don't hear that hurts," and explored the wall with questing fingers.

Again and again, while those spaced, close-whining slugs made his shoulder muscles flinch, Benteen sought for the rack but failed to find it. And during this frantic searching he guessed why those bullets were being fired high. It was so that men could sneak along the corridor below them!

AS BENTEEN'S fingers finally found the gunrack, he gave a whispering curse. The scattergun was gone! Brett Nedrow must have taken it!

Benteen ducked quickly back across the room with a dull feeling of the futility of further efforts. One man couldn't stand off a rush of men he couldn't see. And there was no way to keep them from sneaking along the corridor. Sooner or later they would close in on him, would rake this room with a hail of hot lead.

Brett Nedrow had called him loco. Benteen grimaced at the thought that even now that bragging rider was on his way to Rafter B—and to Jane. He would tell her how a crazy gunsmoke galoot had got himself caught in a six-gun showdown. And she would say regretfully, "Clark always had a wild streak."

Wild streak, hell! All he wanted was a homestead and some cattle in the hills. Brett Nedrow had ruined his last chance of having that by sneaking out of here. Because even though Benteen might live long enough to pay Jane back for what she had said, he would never walk out of this hole alive.

There wasn't a chance!

Then he remembered the front door, and clung to a fragile strand of hope. Slipping quickly to the door he unbarred it, swung it wide open. Again a draft of cool air swept into the room. And a faint shaft of light from the store windows streamed across the sheriff's office.

As if the swift swirl of fresh air were a signal, the shooting ceased.

"Benteen has hightailed out the front door!" a loud voice lanced along the corridor.

But Clark Benteen hadn't hightailed. He stood flattened against the front wall, half-hidden in deep shadow, and he was smiling thinly as a hasty thud of boots echoed down the long corridor. The odds were three to one, as they had been in front of the Palace Saloon when he had taken his first prisoner. Benteen had the faint shine of reflected lamplight in his favor, now, instead of sunlight.

In this fleeting interval of waiting, knowing that his first shot might be his last, Benteen wished swiftly and urgently that Pike Kirby would lead the charge into the office. If he could kill that greedy son, the others wouldn't matter.

But even as the wish was born Benteen's eyes focused on Cherokee Slim's hawk-beaked face and up-tilted gun. Benteen fired, and fired again as another man rushed up behind Slim's slumping form, and another gun exploded.

Then a bullet sliced along Benteen's left temple. He staggered against the door. Groggily, like a drunkard reaching for a lamp post, he tried to grasp the

door for support, but it swung away from him. And before he fell against the door and it slammed shut, his reeling senses registered the sound of Pike Kirby's voice.

"What's going on out there?" the PK boss was demanding.

For a brief, black interval Benteen crouched on his hands and knees. There was a queer roaring in his ears; it reminded him of thunder running through a high-walled canyon. He shook his head. Blood smarted his left eye, and the taste of it was salty-sweet on his lips.

The roaring diminished, and he heard a sobbing groan.

"Is that you, Slim?" he heard Pike Kirby's voice asking.

"No, it's me," panted another voice, "and I got a slug in me!"

"Where's Benteen?" Kirby demanded, his voice echoing along the corrider. That told Benteen that the PK boss was playing it safe.

The wounded man cursed. "I killed the son," he announced. "Go get me a doc, or somebody to fix this hole in my stummick, before I bleed to death."

Benteen propped himself against the wall. He fought off the grogginess that kept shrouding his senses, and listened to hesitant footsteps coming closer. He waited until he heard Kirby step over Cherokee Slim's body.

"Start shootin'," he snarled then, and took a swift step sideward.

KIRBY'S gun blasted instantly, the brief bloom of its muzzle flame giving Benteen a glimpse of Kirby's rage-rutted face. Benteen fired, stepped to one side, and fired again. Kirby's gun exploded once more, that bullet ripping into the floor at Benteen's feet. Then a yeasty, wooshing sigh came plainly to Benteen, that dismal sound followed by the thud of Kirby's elbows on the floor.

Clark Benteen shrugged wearily.

"There's your payoff, Jane," he murmured.

He was opening the front door when Orondorff called from across the street:

"Clark, iss there somethin' I can do?"

Benteen grinned.

"Yes," he called back. "A drink of that good bourbon!"

A gun blasted behind Benteen then, but he didn't hear it. And he didn't feel the smash of his face against the plank walk. Nor see Dutch Orondorff, who hurried across Main Street shouting angry curses. . . .

A long time later Benteen heard voices. At first he couldn't identify them. Then, as he became fully awake, he heard Hawk Halliday ask:

"Is he goin' to make it, Doc?"

"All he needs is luck," the medico announced, "and a good nurse."

"It seems that he has both," Halliday suggested.

There was a sound of footsteps then and a door closing. Clark Benteen became aware of slim, cool fingers gently stroking his forehead, and of a familiar fragrance, long remembered. Even before he opened his eyes he knew that Jane was sitting beside his bed. He looked at her.

"You're going to be all right, Clark," she said quickly. "Doc says you'll be good as new in a month's time."

Benteen didn't smile. "At that rate I'll never catch Worden," he muttered.

He wasn't aware of Hawk Halliday's presence in the room until the old lawman spoke.

"Worden is already caught," he rumbled.

As Benteen stared at the marshal in wide-eyed wonder, Halliday came to the bed with a brush-scarred leather vest in his hand.

"I arrested Worden when he came back to the Rafter B after runnin' out on you at the jail," Hawk explained.

But that didn't make sense to Benteen. "Worden? That wasn't Worden. It was Nedrow."

"Sure," Halliday said. "Which is Worden spelled backwards. I recognized him as bein' wanted for a mail robbery in Texas when he killed a mail clerk."

Benteen could scarcely believe it.

"You mean Nedrow is Worden—the man who drygulched me at Tanner's Tradin' Post?" he demanded.

Halliday nodded. "But what was he doin' down there that day?" Benteen asked. "Why would he go there while this fight here was goin' on?"

"He wanted to buy all the ammunition," Jane explained, "so that Kirby would have no chance of replenishing his supply this side of Tombstone. Brett even bought out a store at Tailholt."

"So that was how it happened," Benteen said musingly. "This Nedrow-Worden and Tanner got together on the spur of the moment."

"Most likely, or else they'd known each other in the past," Halliday said. "Worden spent some of your money, but most of it is still in the linin' of this vest of yours. Jane says she gave it to you a long time ago, so I reckon there's no doubt about you owning it."

For a long moment then, as Marshal Halliday left the room, Benteen lay gripped by utter confusion. No wonder Brett Nedrow had guessed he wasn't a deputy marshal. He must have recognized the man he had thought he had killed, as soon as Jane introduced them.

Then a new thought struck Benteen. A dismal, futile thought that somehow made the recovery of his gold-eagles seem meaningless.

"I suppose Brett is still a sort of hero to you, ain't he?" he asked Jane morosely.

"No," Jane said without hesitation, "and he never was." A slow, sweet smile curved her lips. "There's never been but one hero for me, Clark. Only one."

The surprise shocked Benteen. He couldn't believe she meant it. But her warm eyes were telling him something without the use of words.

"A hero with a wild gunsmoke streak in him?" he asked.

Jane nodded. "Yes, Clark, honey."

And her lips were gently smiling when she leaned over for his kiss.

ANNOUNCING

Next Issue's 3 Great Novels

•

FIGHTING FREIGHTERS

By THEODORE J. ROEMER

SIX-GUN RANGE

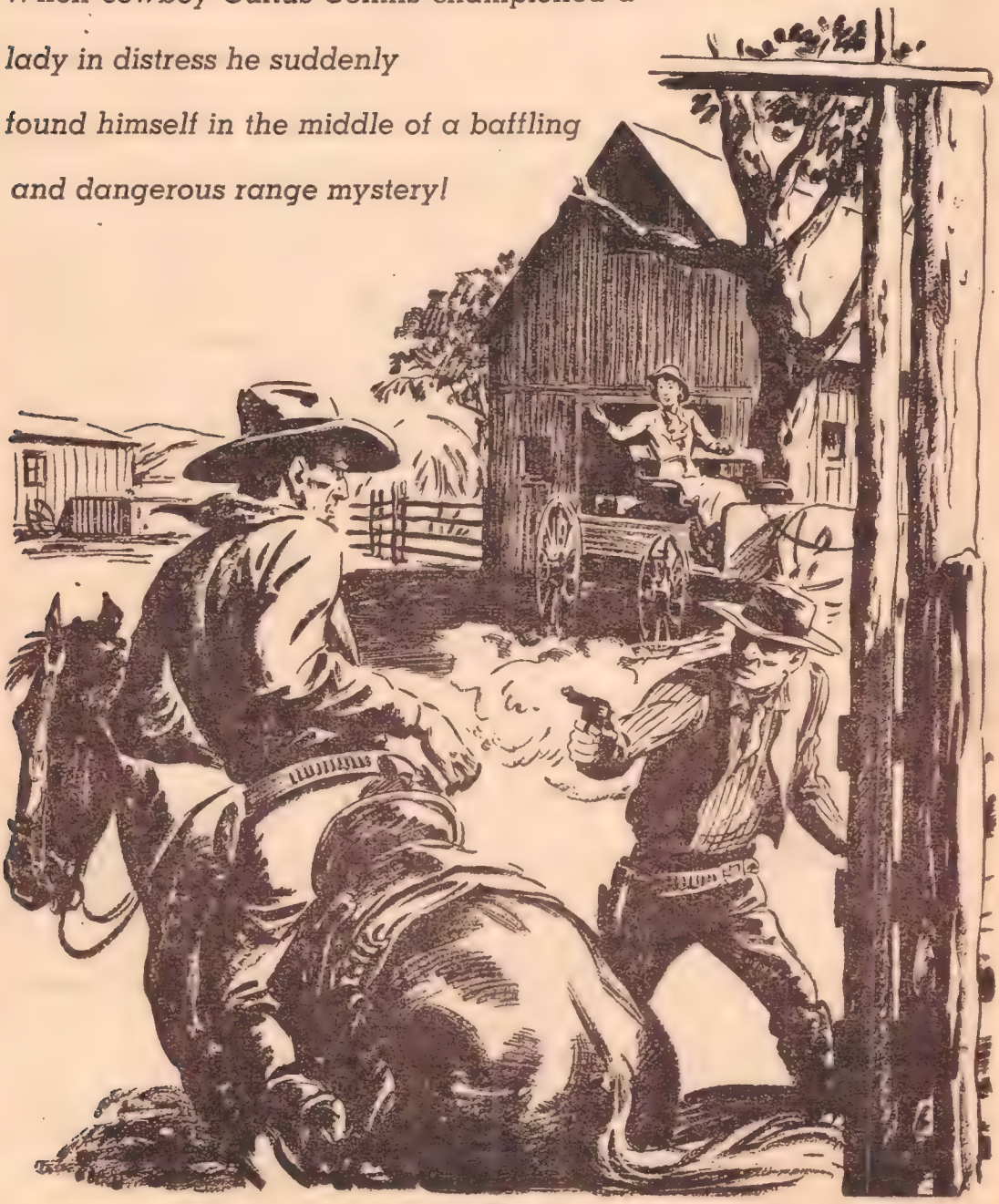
By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

THE LONGHORN TRAIL

By L. P. HOLMES

LOOT of the

When cowboy Cultus Collins championed a lady in distress he suddenly found himself in the middle of a baffling and dangerous range mystery!



LAZY A

A Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

I

IT WAS one of those foggy, raining, dismal nights, when all the world seemed one vast drip, drip of water; cold gusts of wind from the bay, where the fog warnings boomed dismally, boat whistles shrilled. On the streets of San Francisco, cable-car motormen danced jigs on their gongs, seeking to clear the tracks, which they could hardly see in the dim glow of their own headlights.

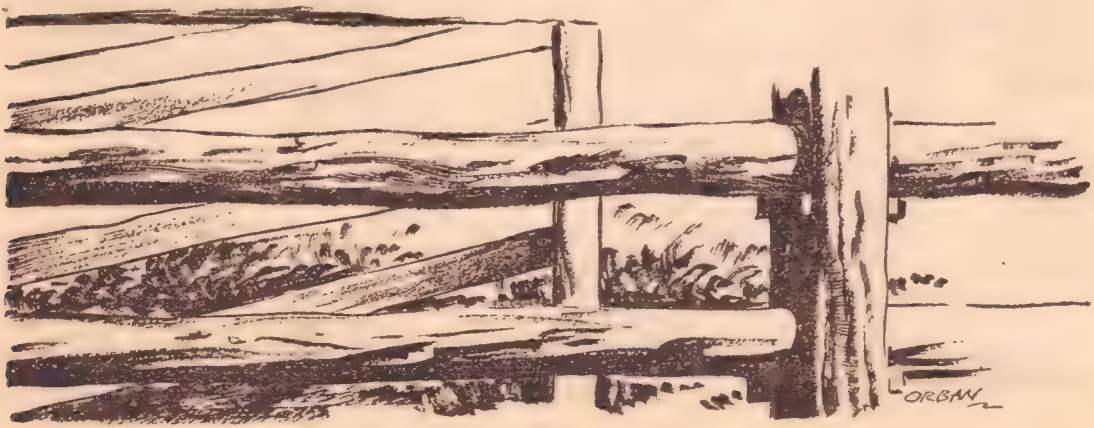
Standing in a half lighted doorway, just outside the borders of Chinatown, was a slender girl. She wore a black suit, black hat. Suit and hat were well worn, and also wet. She carried no umbrella. She did not seem to be beautiful, but perhaps that was because of the abject misery in her big, dark eyes, her utter helplessness. Her face was so pale against the gloom that it seemed like a white mask suspended against a dark curtain. The wind swirled past the doorway, showering her with rain, but she only stared ahead, dumbly.

A policeman emerged out of the fog, peered at her, and went on. A man emerged from a doorway farther up the street, and passed her. He was tall, rather slender, his head surmounted by a huge Stetson, which made him look gigantic in the dim light. His heels hit hard on the sidewalk, because he was wearing high-heeled boots, and he carried a suitcase.

The street car clanged past before he could reach the corner, so he placed his baggage on the sidewalk, shoved his hands deep in his pockets and leaned against a post, also directly in front of the girl. He looked directly at her then, drew his hat farther over his eyes. He shivered a little. He wore no overcoat.

A man came from the opposite direction, swathed in a heavy overcoat, whis-

Copyright, 1926, by Doubleday, Page & Company



tling aimlessly. He was a big man, the collar of his coat touching the brim of his derby hat. He did not see the girl until he was almost past her. He stopped and came back to her. He may not have seen the tall man, who leaned against the post.

"Hello, Kid," he said ingratiatingly. "What are you doing out in the rain, all alone?"

The girl drew back against the wall.

"No coat, no umbrella?" The man in the overcoat laughed. "Say, you must be up against it. Gee, you don't need to shiver on a corner."

"Will you please go away?" asked the girl. "I'm all right."

"I'll say you are, Kid—all right. Come on, and I'll show you a good time."

"Please let me alone," she said softly.

"Don't try to kid me." The man laughed. "I'll show you the best time—"

The tall man stepped in behind him and a huge hand, which gripped like a vise, fastened to his shoulder.

"The lady asked you to let her alone." The tall man's voice seemed mild, apologetic.

The other man squirmed. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"Names wouldn't mean anythin'," the tall fellow said mildly.

The man in the derby jerked loose. "Then keep your hands off me! Trot along and let us alone."

"Ma'am," the tall man spoke softly, ignoring the fellow's threatening attitude, "do you want to go with this man?"

"I certainly do not."

"I reckon that's final, don't you think?"

THE DERBY-HATTED man may not have agreed, for he was foolish enough to swing at the tall man. His overcoat was a handicap. His blow had traveled only half of its arc, when a thick, bony fist, seemingly weighted with lead, caught him under the chin, and he went backward into the street in a heap.

The girl stifled a scream, but the tall man's chuckle was reassuring.

"Did you know this man, ma'am?"

"No. I don't know who he is."

"Neither does he—right now. Ain't it cold! I hate this kind of weather. I s'pose it's because I live so much on the desert."

"On the desert?" the girl repeated softly. "Where everything is clean and good, and the sunshine—"

"Have you lived there?"

"Ages and ages ago."

He peered closer at her. "You don't look old."

"I'm twenty-two."

He laughed softly. "Yeah, you're sure ancient, ma'am. And you're wet and shiverin'. Will you— Say, I just knocked that feller into the street for askin' you to go with him, and I was about to do the same thing. He's gettin' up, prob'ly wonderin' what to do about it."

The man had staggered to the opposite sidewalk, where he stood humped slightly in the rain. His derby was out in the street but he did not seem to miss it. A policeman coming down the street heard the man say something and stopped.

"C'mon," said the tall man, grasping the girl by the arm. "You never can tell what that jigger will tell the law."

Shielding her from the rain as much as possible, he picked up his suitcase and led the girl around the corner. She did not hold back. There was too much sincerity in this big cowboy's voice for her to feel afraid.

"Where are we going?" she ventured.

"I know a place," he said. "It ain't so much to look at, and lots of ornery folks eat there, but they sure sabe how to cook a steak, and make soup. Do you like soup?"

"Soup?" the girl said queerly, as though it was something she had once known, but had forgotten.

"Yeah. Lots of onions and meat. Here we are."

He led her up a rickety stairs, where the air was redolent with odors of frying meats, garlic, and the hundred-and-one odors typical of a bohemian chop-house where no questions are asked.

No head waiter met them. In fact they were almost knocked down by a hurrying waiter, carrying a tray of dishes.

It was warm up there amid all those smells. The tall man led the girl to a booth and they sat down. He placed his suitcase beside him where he could watch it.

flecked with freckles. He wore a cheap brown suit, flannel shirt, and his trousers were tucked in the tops of his high-heeled boots. There was no denying that he was homely. Then he smiled at her. She caught her breath—and smiled back at him.

He was not the same man when he

An old saddle blanket was flung over Idaho's head

The girl's face was slightly flushed, and when she removed her dripping hat, he saw that she was pretty. Her hair was a soft brown. His face was long and bony, with a large nose, keen gray eyes and a big mouth. His cheek-bones were prominent, his hair neutral, neither blond, brown nor red.

His hands were huge, bony-wristed,

smiled. She stared at him, while the waiter took their order, wondering that a smile should so absolutely change a man.

"Ma'am," said the tall man gravely when the waiter went away, "my name's Collins. My friends call me Cultus—Cultus Collins, from Cuyamac."

"And I am Mary Smith," she said

simply. "They used to call me Mary Elizabeth—when I had friends."

"Uh-huh. Mary Smith, how long since you ate a meal?"

"Why—er—this noon."

"You don't need to lie to me, Mary Elizabeth. Callin' you that ought to prove me yore friend, and you hadn't ought to lie to yore friends."

Mary Smith looked into the gray eyes of "Cultus" Collins, and decided not to lie, because he seemed to know.

"It wasn't a big meal," she said slowly.

"It wasn't any meal at all, Mary Smith."

"No, I guess it wasn't." And then Mary Smith bowed her head on her wet arms and cried, while Cultus Collins upset a bottle of catsup, trying to pat her shoulder and tell her to quit crying.

MARY SMITH finally stopped crying, dabbled her eyes with a wet handkerchief, and tried to appear brave, while she choked over the first meal she had eaten in two days. Cultus did not question her, nor did she offer any explanation, until the steaks and baked potatoes and soup and salads were but memories, and they were eating huge slices of apple pie and cheese, for which the place was famous.

There were roses in Mary Smith's cheeks now, even if her body was still wet from the rain. Bit by bit she told her tale of woe. Mary had come from a little town in New England, had literally run away because she did not want to marry a certain man, greatly desired by her parents, and because she wanted to see some of the world. She had saved enough money to buy a ticket to the Middle West, and by selling a few pieces of jewelry she had been able to stretch this ticket to San Francisco, where she had an aunt.

But the aunt had not been there.

Lack of a business education had lost Mary several fairly good positions. Sickness had cost her all her slender savings, and now she was a week overdue on her room rent, and the room had been locked against her. For three days she had haunted the stores, trying to get a job, but they had merely looked at her shabby clothes and told her there was nothing available just now.

Cultus Collins rubbed his chin and wondered what to do. He was not financially able to give her much assistance. He could give her enough money to pay her room rent and for a few days of square meals. But that would not remedy the clothes proposition, and without clothes she could not hope to get a decent job.

"Just what was you goin' to do—standin' there in the rain, Mary Smith?" he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. "I—I don't know. My body was numb, and I guess my mind was not far from being in the same state. It was all so hopeless!"

"Uh-huh, I see. And yet you wouldn't go with that man."

She shook her head. "I was going the other way."

"Toward the bay?"

Mary Smith nodded. Cultus sighed and shook his head.

"It's a queer old world, Mary Smith. I've been here two days, and I was roomin' in a little place just up the street from where we met. I was leavin'. I had plenty of time, but I hurried. That's fate, I reckon."

"It was fate for me," sighed the girl. "The bay seems a long way from here, Mr. Collins."

Cultus smiled widely. "Nothin' like a steak to make you change your mind."

II

ANOTHER couple had entered the restaurant, and to the next booth. The man was fairly young, sleek-haired, flashily dressed. The woman was wearing a brown traveling suit, expensive furs, and a small hat. She was young and beautiful, but her face was contorted with indignation, as she

faced the young man.

"I suppose you think that was smart!" she snapped at him. "Is it any of your business if I want to take a little trip?"

The man deposited a suitcase beside the one Cultus had placed near the booth.

"Don't talk so damn loud," he growled to the girl. "Get in there and sit down, Janice. I just wanted to be sure you wasn't doin' a runout on me. I know your lawyer friend has been up to see you twice in two days, and you haven't any need of legal advice. Sit down!"

They sat down in the next booth, and Cultus and Mary Smith could hear everything that was said.

"Let that pocketbook alone!" exclaimed the girl. "Well, are you satisfied?"

It was evident that the man had investigated her bag.

"You're not too well heeled," he said, "but that don't mean you won't meet somebody at the Ferry Building. I heard you tell the taxi driver where to take you. Come clean, Janice. You were going to leave me flat. I've bought you clothes, diamonds, paid your rent, given you a car—and you run out on me."

For a few moments their conversation was inaudible, then the man's voice was raised in anger.

"What do you care how I make my money? I suppose you think if the police get me, they'll take you, too, because you spent my money, eh? Well, my money is as good as the money of that bum of a lawyer! He's as crooked as anybody in the district! Sa-a-ay! Are you giving me the gate for that welcher?"

"I'm sick of your insinuations," said the girl. "Call me a taxi."

"Why, you little bum, anybody would think you was Bernhardt! Snap out of it! Get away from *me?* Fine chance! Sit still, or I'll knock you for a loop!"

Cultus was not so interested that he failed to see two men come in. One was the big man he had knocked into the street, while the other was of the same type as the man with the girl. They halted midway of the room.

"There's that dirty welcher now!" said the man in the booth. "Leggo me!"

A dish crashed to the floor as he jerked away from the girl and stepped outside the booth. The two men had turned toward it, and the big man had stepped forward, his hand reaching inside his overcoat.

It seemed to Cultus that both men knew what this meeting would mean. He saw the man at the booth whip out a snub-nosed gun. The other man was just as quick, and both guns spat rapidly, filling the room with short, snappy reports, as both men shot as fast as they could press the trigger. It was all done in seconds. The man at the booth entrance dropped his gun, swung around, and his grasping hands tore down the booth curtains, pulling them down on top of him, as he fell.

The other man was on the floor, trying to stay on his hands and knees. A frightened waiter had dropped a filled tray, and was running toward the back.

"They hit that girl, too!" someone yelled.

And then somebody cut off the lights, plunging the room in darkness. Cultus grabbed his suitcase in one hand, while with the other he clung to Mary Smith, fairly dragging her to the top of the stairs through the frenzied mob.

At the top of the stairs he lifted her up with one arm, fending the strugglers away with his suitcase, and plunged down the rickety stairs and out into the rain, where he let her down. It would be only a minute or two before the police would be there. He hurried Mary around a corner, where they found a taxi, and he told the driver to take them to the Ferry Building. By the dim light in the cab, Cultus could see how white Mary was.

He patted her on the shoulder, and she tried to smile.

"Hang onto your nerve," he whispered, then his eyes happened to fall upon the suitcase at their feet.

It was not Cultus' bag at all! It was the other one!

Only in the dark could it have been mistaken for Cultus' battered suitcase. This one was expensive. But Cultus did not mention it to Mary.

AT THE Ferry Building Cultus bought tickets to Oakland. It would be ten minutes before ferry time, so he led Mary Smith to a secluded seat and put the suitcase on his lap. It was not locked. He unfastened it, and Mary gasped with astonishment. It was filled to capacity with women's dainty clothes.

On the top were two envelopes. The first contained a ticket and Pullman accommodations to Oreana, Arizona and a hundred-dollar bill. The other was sealed in a plain envelope. Cultus ran the blade of his knife under the flap and opened the envelope without damaging it. He and Mary read:

Dear M:

Introducing Janice Lee, alias anything you want to call her. She knows part of the game, and is a fair actress, if you can keep her sober. Good luck to you.

Yours,
L

P. S. I only gave her a hundred out of that five you sent, so you only owe me a hundred, if it pans out all right. Better see that she gets hers, because I won't swear to her playing on the square, unless you do.

Cultus resealed the letter and replaced it in the suitcase. He handed the tickets and hundred-dollar bill to Mary Smith.

"Why give them to me?" she asked, looking at him queerly.

"Does fate scare yuh, Mary Elizabeth?" he asked softly. "I was goin' to Arizona when you made me miss my car. I wasn't headin' for Oreana, but it's on my way."

"But I'm not going to Arizona."

"Listen, Mary Elizabeth Smith. That big feller was sendin' that girl, Janice Lee, out to Oreana, Arizona. He is plumb full of lead now, and I heard somebody say the girl was hit. A lot of lead was used up. You was headin' for the bay, wasn't yuh? Here's a suitcase full of clothes, and I seen a trunk check stickin' down in a corner. There's a hundred-dollar bill. From now on, you're Janice Lee, a pretty fair actress, as long as you stay sober. And they better pay you what's comin' to you, or you'll yelp."

"But—but wouldn't it be wrong?" faltered Mary.

"It started wrong," he said.

As Cultus fastened the suitcase, ferry-boat passengers came crowding out. He and Mary Smith went out together.

And while they listened to the throb of the engines and the eerie wail of the foghorns a police officer was reporting to a desk-sergeant:

"It was all over when we got there, Sarge. Two dead men and a girl they say can't live. Cleaned up themselves. Everyone else was out of there, but we got a suitcase, which one of the waiters said Speed Evans brought in. Loring, the lawyer, was all shot to pieces."

Another officer came in, carrying the battered suitcase, and men from Homicide examined it. They found two pairs of overalls, several pairs of socks, a red shirt, a lariat and some packages of tobacco.

"If that belonged to Speed Evans it's too bad he got killed," observed a hard-bitten detective, grinning. "The blamed crook must have been starting out to do something useful in the world."

"What do you know about Loring, the lawyer?"

"Enough to shed few tears over his demise," said the detective.

"And the girl?"

"Speed's girl, Sarge. Maybe Loring tried to get her. She's bad off from liquor. Got two automatic bullets in her besides. My gosh, that dump is a wreck!"

"Somebody else took a wallop at Loring tonight," said a beat cop. "When I ran across him he was all over mud, and his hat was in the street. He tried to tell me what it was all about, but I told him to go home and wash his face."

As far as the police were concerned, the matter was closed. Cultus Collins' suitcase was thrown on a shelf, and the officers went back on the job. . . .

OREANA CITY was a typical cattle town of the Southwest, an old place, where the original settlers had builded with adobe, and was still half adobe. Most of the houses along a single dusty street were one-story. In the early days they had been built along a crooked road, which was still the main street.

Like the majority of cattle towns, Oreana City was more unmoral than immoral. The honkatonk was the main center of amusement and gambling was taken as a matter of course. The town was located at the end of a branch railroad line, which served cattle and mining country. A freight and passenger train made daily round trips over the line, making little pretense of a schedule. A stage line ran to the gold mines of Welcome Creek, thirty miles away. Being an outfitting center for both cattlemen and miners made the town somewhat the pivotal center of that little universe. It was also the county seat.

Three miles northwest was the Lazy A ranch; three miles southwest was the Star X. Between these two outfits a feud had lasted so long that no one paid much attention to it any more. At least they hadn't until the funeral of old Jud Ault, owner of the Lazy A. A year before he finally died, Jud Ault had been shot from ambush, the bullet injuring his spine and causing partial paralysis. Since then he had not been able to walk. It was generally believed that the bullet had been fired by one of Eph Wheeler's Star X outfit, if not by old Eph himself. But there had been no evidence to convict anyone.

The feud had started so long ago that no one seemed to know just what had caused it. Some said it started over a card game, in which whisky had played a prominent part; others said it was over the woman who married Jud Ault and died when their little girl, Faith, was but a tiny slip of a child. At any rate, Jud Ault and Eph Wheeler, who had been bunkies before the trouble, had not met face to face in over twenty years.

Jud Ault, even before his injury, had been a grim, sour-faced old man, quick of temper. He hated mankind, and did not hesitate to speak his mind to that effect. The Lazy A made Ault rich. Mining engineers had urged the old man to lease or sell part of his ranch, which was rich enough to make him a millionaire, but he always refused. He hated miners. They dug holes in the ground. He did not want to be rich that way.

Faith, the prettiest girl in the country, but denied suitors, had grown up in awe of her parents. Woe to the gay cowboy who tried to jingle his spurs across the threshold of the Lazy A ranchhouse. But when she was eighteen she married Jack Keene, a gambler—ran away with him, spent a short honeymoon, and came back for the paternal blessing.

What they had found was a door closed against them. Never again did Jud Ault speak to his daughter. He drew back in his shell, like an old turtle, even refusing to go to town. And when it was definitely decided that Jud Ault had made his final decision, Jack Keene, gambler and former lawyer—according to Miles Lane, a local attorney who had formed a friendship for Keene—disappeared from Oreana City, alone.

Not even then had Jud Ault relented and taken back his daughter who had no means of support. Men had gone to him and urged him to take care of her, even if he did not want to see her, and he had cursed them out. There was no doubt in the minds of everyone that Jack Keene had had an eye on the Lazy A, when he

married Faith, and he had sneaked away like a cur, when he found that his marriage did not mean money.

Then came the Keene baby. Men had believed that old Jud Ault would relent now. But he never saw his grandchild. Faith Keene lived in a little shack of a house, which Jack had partly furnished. She tried to make a living by taking in washing, but the returns were too small compared to the physical labor involved. Also she was obliged to compete with a Chinese laundry—which some of the cowboys offered to put out of business and give her a clear field. But she declined their offer.

Things had been breaking badly for Faith Keene when Miles Lane had come to her with some money, which he told her was from Jack Keene. She did not wonder why Jack had not sent her this money direct, because she was too thankful to get it. Lane would not tell her where Jack Keene was. Every month the Oreana City lawyer would bring her enough for her wants, so she was able to struggle along and take care of her baby.

III

EAST OF Oreana City, about four miles, were the tumbledown ranch buildings of the Cross Arrow, owned by "Badger" Hill and his son, known as "Shif'less," veritable range derelicts. Badger was a short, squatty, bewhiskered man who resembled his namesake. His vocabulary was limited to few words —mostly profane.

Shif'less was a big hulk, less than thirty years of age. He was not unhandsome in his big, lumbering way. His features were strong, blocky, and his wistful gray eyes seemed to be continually wondering at the world from beneath a huge mop of blond hair, which seemed forever to stand on end.

It was hinted that the Cross Arrow existed through appropriating "oreanas"—calves which had escaped the branding-iron of their original owners. Farther to the north, such animals were designated "mavericks." And it was also hinted that Badger Hill was not averse to "forcing" an oreana—taking a calf away from its mother, run it on the Cross Arrow, and claim it for his own.

Shif'less Hill had, in a way, grown up with Faith Keene, and always had admired her from afar. Jud Ault had detested Badger Hill and his big cowpuncher son—making it mutual, because both Badger and Shif'less hated the hard-faced owner of the Lazy A.

On the other hand, Eph Wheeler, of the Star X, was a mild-mannered old man, thin-faced, keen-eyed, the type of old cattleman who cursed with no trace of emotion, and fanned the hammer of his six-shooter, when the need arose, with the air of a man who had a slightly disagreeable task to do, and wished to do it as quickly as possible.

"Dude" Wheeler, the son, was a tall young man who walked so straight in his high-heeled boots that it seemed as though a gust of wind would blow him over backward. He was thin of face, with a wide mouth, showing excellent teeth when he smiled. His eyes were deep-set, black as India-ink, beneath heavy brows, while his nose was bony.

His love for gaudy clothes had won him his cognomen, for he was the flashiest cowboy in the Oreana country. But Dude was a tophand, ready to fight, drink, gamble or race. He had been taught to hate the Lazy A, but now there was no lazy A, as far as the Ault family was concerned. Faith has been disowned, and no one had ever heard Jud Ault speak of having any relatives. So, as long as there was no Ault family to fight, it seemed that the feud would, or had, died. No one considerd Faith Keene was an Ault.

The Lazy A was in the hands of "Idaho" Breen, who had been Ault's foreman for years. Idaho was small of stature, as gray as a badger and with about the same disposition. Perhaps association with Jud Ault had caused Breen to become cynical, never smiling.

Cleve Sears, the sheriff, had well described Idaho Breen, when he said, "If I was goin' to pick out a man to do a first-

class job of killin' I'd pick Idaho Breen, 'cause he'd be sure that it was a neat job —and I don't reckon his conscience would ever bother him."

Not that Idaho had ever killed anybody—not in the Oreana country, at least. He never mentioned the feud between the Lazy A and the Star X, but rode with a Winchester rifle in a boot under his saddle fender.

It had been hinted that Dude Wheeler had found Faith Ault easy to look upon, but because she was an Ault, he had rarely seen her. Seldom did the Lazy A and the Star X outfits meet in Oreana City, though they attended the same dances, causing the sheriff much mental anguish.

The Aults were gone now, and there were only Idaho Breen and his three punchers, "Omaha" Woods, "Mex" Leone, and "Pie" Ide. But they were enough. A man had to be salty to work for the Lazy A.

Omaha Woods was broad of beam, with the neck and shoulders of a wrestler and the mustache of a Viking. Mex Leone was small, slender, almost as black as an Indian, the best bronc rider in the country. Pie Ide was rangy, tall, powerful. Men likened him to Abraham Lincoln in his facial aspect, but there it stopped, for Pie Ide was as hard-bitted as a roundup bucker. However, he had a sense of humor, which neither Omaha nor Mex seemed to possess.

About a week after the funeral of Jud Ault, Shif'less Hill went on his monthly peanut spree. Where other cowboys spent their pay for liquor and cards, Shif'less consumed large quantities of peanuts and a sprinkling of peppermint candy hearts, after chuckling over the inscriptions.

AS HE strolled to the front gate of Faith Keene's little place, she was sitting on the porch with her little boy. Shif'less opened the gate and came in, sprawling lazily on the steps. He offered Faith some peanuts, but she declined, smiling at the boyishness of the big cowboy.

"How you makin' it?" he asked Faith.

"Oh, all right, Shif'less."

Shif'less crunched a mouthful of peanuts. "Tha's good, Mrs. Keene. Glad to hear it. Say"—he looked up at her quizzically—"I heard your dad left a will."

Faith looked at him blankly. "Why, I —I never heard—"

"I heard Idaho Breen tellin' about it. Miles Lane wrote it out. Idaho signed it. Some of the boys was talkin' about you gettin' the Lazy A, but Breen said there was a will. He didn't tell much, except there's a niece or somebody mixed up in it. I was a-wonderin' if Miles had told you anythin' about it."

"He didn't, Shif'less." Faith sighed deeply.

"I hear lots of fellers goin' around sayin' Jud Ault was all right. I suppose that's the thing to do, after a man's dead, but they all knowed—"

"He was my father, Shif'less."

"Bein' a father seems to be more or less of a responsibility, Mrs. Keene, but your dad shucked his. Sure, he's dead and gone, and you get tears in your eyes when folks talk about him, but—" Shif'less smiled slowly, his wistful eyes on the little boy on Faith's lap. "I've got a dad—and lots of folks say he ain't worth nothin'. He's a mean-voiced, hard-fisted old pelican. They say he steals cattle, but they ain't never caught him at it. And he sure uses bad language. Sometimes he gets drunk and acts pretty rough. But as long as I can remember, Mrs. Keene, he's never said a mean thing to me, except"—Shif'less smiled again—"the time he said I sure was a throw-back to my monkey ancestors. Dad hates peanuts."

Faith laughed, and the boy chuckled, as though he understood.

"You named him Jack, didn't you?" asked Shif'less.

"Yes," she said softly. "Jack Keene, Junior."

"Well"—Shif'less got to his feet, brushing away the peanut shells—"I'll be anglin' along. Say, I was just thinkin'. Out at the ranch I've got a little

paint bronc. He ain't bigger'n a minute. Been goin' to break him to ride, but he's so small my feet hit the ground. I was wonderin' if little Jack wouldn't like him."

"Oh, that's thoughtful of you, Shif'less, but don't you realize that little Jack won't be able to ride a horse for a long time?"

"Uh-huh. Well, I—uh—tha's all right, too. I'll give him the bronc, and keep it out at the ranch until you need it. Well, good day, Mrs. Keene. I reckon I'll get more peanuts, and head for home."

Shif'less was heading for the store when he met Cleve Sears, the sheriff. Sears was short and fat, with a full-moon sort of a face. His idea of a good time was to sit in the shade and whittle.

"Hello, Shif'less," he said jerkily. Too much fat made him short of breath.

"'Lo, Cleve," drawled Shif'less. "What you know?"

"I know that Idaho Breen is plenty mad. This mornin', he says, he found fifty-three Lazy A cow hides in a fifty-foot-deep prospect hole between the Lazy A and the road to Welcome Creek. Said he didn't know that them hides was there till he smelled 'em."

"Smellin' kind of deep, wasn't he?" said Shif'less. "Still that ain't so bad for him. Hides are worth good money these days."

"Idaho says he'll show the Star X where to get off at."

Shif'less cracked his few remaining peanuts, poured them into his mouth and began chewing complacently. "Did you hear that old Jud Ault had a will wrote out before he died?"

"Somebody said he did. Left the Lazy A to a niece of his."

"And left his daughter out in the cold."

"Yeah. But I hear her husband is sendin' her money every month, Shif'less. He can't be such an awfully bad jigger."

"You reckon the feud between the Lazy A and the Star X is ended?" mumbled Shif'less.

THE SHERIFF shrugged his fat shoulders.

"It ought to be, Shif'less. Still, you never can tell. They tell me that this niece of Jud Ault's is named Ault—Mary Ault. Usually I'd say a woman ain't got no business runnin' a cow ranch, but if she keeps Idaho Breen there she won't have to do much of the runnin'."

"The Lazy A is worth a lot of money, Cleve. One of them minin' engineers that was pokin' around the hills told me the surface showin' on the Lazy A is worth a cold million."

"Yeah, I heard that. Old Jud knowed it, but the Lazy A made him plenty of money, and he hated holes in the ground. I asked Miles Lane if the old man's will stated that no minin' was ever to be done on the Lazy A, but he said it didn't."

"I been wonderin' if Faith couldn't contest that will, Cleve."

"Miles says she can't. The old man disowned her, didn't want to even leave her a dollar, but Miles showed him where she could bust the will if he didn't mention her at all."

"Uh-huh." Shif'less nodded. "It looks to me like them damn' lawyers just *has* to be accurate, even if it wrongs the right folks. Well, I'm all out of peanuts. See you later, Cleve."

"S'long, Shif'less."

Shif'less sauntered on up the street. He saw Idaho Breen in front of Miles Lane's office, talking with Lane. They only nodded to him coldly.

MILES LANE, attorney-at-law, was above average height, slightly stooped. His sandy hair was thin and wiry; his eyes, close-set, were buried beneath beetling brows, which grew together over the bridge of his thin nose. The hinges of his wide jaws were knobby from incessant gum-chewing. But although the jaw was wide at its hinge, it tapered down to a weak chin, which gave his head the appearance of being topheavy.

Invariably he wore a wing collar and

a stringy black tie, to give him a judicial air. And since he was a bottle drinker he was often under the influence of liquor. He was deep in conversation now with Idaho Breen, in his office to which they had retired.

"You said she'd be here Wednesday, eh?" questioned Idaho, his cold eyes studying the lawyer's flushed face.

"Yes; Wednesday."

"When is the will to be read?"

"After she gets here. I suppose the best thing to do will be to take her right out to the Lazy A."

"That's what I aim to do, Miles. I was just wonderin' if Faith Keene will make any move to contest the will.

"If she had enough money to make a fight of it, she could, Idaho. But she can't do much. The will gives her one dollar. That's legal. And everybody knows that Jud Ault disowned her. I don't think she's got a chance to contest the will. I don't believe she's ever thought of such a thing. She's proud."

"How much do you think the Lazy A is worth, Miles?"

The lawyer smiled thoughtfully. "The mineral rights are easily worth a million. When those engineers prospected it, they said it was so rich they were afraid to estimate. One of 'em got drunk and talked. I happen to know that Eastern capital offered Jud more money than he knew existed, just for the mineral rights."

"I know," said Idaho. "I've had assays made, too. Oh, it's there, Miles."

"You bet it's there. Now, what about those cow hides?"

"Just what I told you. That deep shaft is full of Lazy A hides. That Star X outfit has been eatin' Lazy A meat for years, and I've wondered where they threw the hides."

"Any proof?" asked Lane judicially.

"How can you prove who shot a beef? They've all been shot."

"Then drop it till you've got proof, Idaho. There's no use starting a battle with the Star X."

"Just let 'em keep on eatin' our meat, eh?"

"Have you ever eaten any Star X beef?"

"You're damn well right, I have! But not that much."

"The amount doesn't matter. I want you to forget those hides. We don't want to stir up any war right now. Get this girl established out at the Lazy A, Breen. I suppose every cowpuncher in the country will want to marry her."

Breen laughed coldly. "My own outfit have taken to washin' their necks."

Lane laughed softly. "I might marry her myself. Now you do as I say, Idaho—just forget those hides. Rustling is petty larceny beside what we'll get."

IDAHO stepped over to the front window, looking out over the crooked main street. Leaning against the wall, near the window, was Shif'less Hill, eating peanuts. Idaho motioned to Lane, who came over to the window. Apparently the whole attention of Shif'less was on his peanuts.

Idaho watched until the big Cross Arrow puncher, finally dusted the peanut shells off his shirt front, shoved the remainder of his store in his chaps pocket and walked away. He did not even glance toward the window. Idaho stepped back, his eyes squinting narrowly.

"Do you suppose that big fat-head was listenin' to us?" he asked.

"I don't think so," said Lane. "Anyway, what could he hear?"

"Nothin', I reckon. I don't like him."

"He's harmless."

"Yeah, I suppose he is. Except when it comes to stealin' calves."

"Anyway, our conversation was none of his business."

But perhaps Shif'less Hill felt differently about it. As he untied his horse at the hitch-rack, mounted, and rode toward home, he was thinking of something he had heard when he'd had no intention of listening. When he first had stopped in front of Miles Lane's office all he had heard had been the dull mumble of conversation, un-

til Lane had raised his voice slightly and said:

"Just forget those hides. Rustling is petty larceny beside what we'll get."

"Beside what we'll get," muttered Shif'less. "Now, just why did he say that, I wonder?" . . . .

IN ANOTHER town, distant from Oreana City, Cultus Collins, sitting in another office, was intently reading a letter. He read:

Dear Al:

You heard about me getting shot? It was over a year ago. Since then I've been a cripple —paralysis. Bullet lodged against my spine, and the doctors are afraid to take it away. I've lost my nerve, Al. I'm as old as hell, and they say I'm as bitter as gall. Maybe I am. You don't know how it is to be old, cripple, nothing to look forward to.

Al, I'm not appealing to the Association. I don't want no cow detective hanging around, but I do want a man who can find out things. Maybe I'm crazy, but I feel that everything is not right. The old Lazy A is worth a lot of money. I've made my will. But something makes me feel like an old bull, dyin' out in the open, surrounded by coyotes and buzzards, waiting. I suppose they hate me. I've hated a lot in my time. See if you can find the right man, Al. The Lazy A can pay well. Hope I'll see you some day.

Yours truly,
Jud Ault

Cultus Collins looked up from the letter. A gray-haired man, with kindly blue eyes was seated at a desk beside him, idly drawing circles on a desk blotter. On the walls were detail maps of Arizona, a meat packer's calendar, a framed picture of a longhorn steer. From the adjoining room came the clicking of a typewriter.

"I had a hard time locating you, Collins," said the gray-haired man. "I got that letter nearly three weeks ago."

"You say this Lazy A is at Oreana City?"

"Yes. Have you ever been there?"

Cultus shook his head. "No. Do you believe in fate?"

"In fate? Why, I don't know, Collins. Do you?"

"I'm beginnin' to," Cultus smiled as he folded up the letter. "That's a queer sort of a letter, Al. There's a lot of the soul of a bitter man in it. I better see if I can help him. I don't know what he wants done. Do you?"

"No. Perhaps it's merely hallucinations, Cultus. It'll be up to you to go there and see what you can find out. I'll give you a note to Ault."

"All right."

The secretary of the Cattlemen's Association penciled a note for Cultus, while the lean-faced cowboy grinned as he manufactured a cigarette. He still had an hour to catch the same train that Mary Smith was taking to Oreana City.

Cultus had had no inkling that the Cattle Association was going to send him to Oreana City. He had told Mary good-by, and had promised to join her as soon as possible to help carry out the deception. Neither of them knew what it meant, but there was no question but that it was a crooked deal. And now the Association was sending Cultus to the same location.

"What's so funny to you?" queried the secretary, as he handed over the note.

Cultus grinned, but did not reply. They shook hands and Cultus went back to the busy street of an Arizona metropolis. He headed for the depot, where he found Mary Smith.

Part of the hundred-dollar bill had been invested in a modest gray suit and a small hat. There were roses in her cheeks now, as she sprang up to greet Cultus.

"I've got to buy a ticket to Oreana," he told her.

"Are you going with me?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh, I'm so glad, Mr. Collins!"

"Well, that's nice of you, Miss Janice Lee." Cultus sobered quickly. "Don't forget that's who you are, little woman. Forget Mary Elizabeth Smith. And my name's Jones, and I'm from Oklahoma. All you know about me is that you met me on the train, and you think I'm buyin' cattle."

"But—but what is the idea?"

"Strictly business, Miss Lee. Unless

I'm mistaken, there'll be someone to meet you in Oreana City. Let 'em do the talkin', and you'll soon know what the game is. I can't be with yuh. But don't be scared. They won't hurt you. That ain't what they want you for. But I won't be far away. Play the game, Mary Elizabeth."

"Oh, I'll do that, Mr. Jones of Oklahoma."

"*Buena muchacha.*" Cultus smiled. "I have a feelin' you're goin' to be a help in my business this time."

"What is your business, anyway?"

"Bein' Jones of Oklahoma, a cattle buyer."

* * * * *

"OFF THAT shirt! Off that shir-r-r-rt!"

Pie Ide's voice almost lifted the shingles off the Lazy A bunkhouse. Mex Leone stopped putting on a cerise creation, and stared at Ide, who had been shining his boots with Rising Sun stove-polish, which was smelling to high heaven.

"Ain't this my shirt?" Mex asked softly.

"Your shirt! Sa-a-a-ay, when did you own a shirt like that? I bought that shirt in Phoenix three years ago, Mex. I'm not dressin' both of you jiggers. Omaha's got on a pair of my socks, and if that ain't my red tie he's—Hey, Omaha, that's my collar! You never had none as high as that. If you ever set down hard, you'd slice off your ears. Now, look at it! Why don't you polish your boots *after* you dress your neck? I can't wear that collar now! Wear one of yours, Omaha? That's right neighborly of you, cowboy. I've got a fifteen and a half neck, and you've got a seventeen."

"I'd rather have a phonygraft, wouldn't you, Omaha?" asked Mex, searching his war-sack for another shirt. "You can shut off a phonygraft."

"I don't pay no attention to the big scorpion," said Omaha. "He thinks he can claim things by talkin' louder than anybody else. That was my collar. And this tie—"

"Give us the hist'ry of it," begged Pie Ide. "After you've done lied your soul into purgatory, I'll tell you where and how I got that tie. Mex! Didn't I tell you to let that shirt alone? Flimsy? Of course it's flimsy! But you didn't need to rip it thataway, just showin' it was flimsy. O-h-h-h-h, why didn't your folks veal you in yore callow youth?"

"Ain't you goin' to shave?" asked Omaha mildly.

"Not with my razor," said Mex. "Every time Pie shaves with my razor I have to pay a barber a dollar to hone the nicks out of it."

"Aw, he's beautiful enough." Omaha grinned. "When that girl takes a look at him, she'll—"

"Wonder how I can stand to live with you two misfits," groaned Pie. "Yeah, I'm goin' to shave—with Mex's razor. I'm goin' to wear that flimsy shirt and I'm goin' to accept one of Omaha's clean collars, even if I have to punch some new buttonholes to ram my collar-button through."

"Are you aimin' to make a play for this heiress?" asked Omaha resignedly.

"Just like a road-runner pickin' a grasshopper," said Pie seriously. "There ain't nothin' in the Constitution says I ain't eligible, is there? I'm a clean, whole-souled young feller, and I've got ambitions."

"If you'd said you was clean-souled, I'd keep still, 'cause your soul ain't visible," said Mex. "You ain't took a bath since your bronc bogged down in the Little Muddy last spring. With all the land she's gettin' on the old Lazy A, I don't reckon the lady would want any extra real estate, Pie."

Mex dodged through the doorway just ahead of the shoe-brush which Pie hurled. It was a good throw, but the angle was bad, and Omaha got it across the bridge of his nose. He went backward over a chair, landing on his back near the door, howling. Nothing would ever convince Omaha that Pie Ide had

not intended to hit him. He came to his feet, swearing, blood running from his injured nose, eyes half blinded.

His grasping hands came in contact with his belt and gun on a bunk, and he fired one wild shot, as Pie went under a bunk on his hands and knees. Omaha staggered to the center of the room, trying to locate Pie.

"What's goin' on in here?" Idaho Breen hearing the commotion, had come from the stable. "What happened to you, Omaha? Put down that gun!"

"It was an accident, Idaho!" panted Pie, sticking his nose and eyes out between a drapery of blankets, which hung down over the end of the bunk. "I throwed that brush at Mex, and Omaha walked into it. Take the gun away from him, Idaho."

"Id wadden't no dab aggcided," denied Omaha. "He idtedded to hid be."

"He throwed it at me." Mex stuck his head around the corner of the doorway. "But you've got my consent to kill him, Omaha.

"Some of you fools are goin' to kill each other one of these days," declared Idaho. "Why don't you ever grow up?"

V

OMAHA tossed the gun to the bunk, and turned to the broken mirror to examine his injury. The nose was swelling, and was tinged with purple across the bridge. Idaho grunted disgustedly and walked out, while Pie crawled from beneath the bunk and advised Omaha to hold his breath and stop the bleeding.

"Will thad stob id?" asked Omaha wearily. He tried it, with no results. "How log?" he asked heavily. "How log do you hab to hold id?"

"All depends." Pie said seriously. "Some die a lot harder than others."

But Pie had Omaha's gun now, and walked calmly outside to join Mex.

Idaho was hitching up the buggy team, to drive to Oreana City to meet the train. Idaho had not dressed specially for the reception of the heiress of the Lazy A, but the three cowboys felt differently. All they knew was that Mary Ault, old Jud Ault's niece, was coming to the Lazy A. Idaho had told them she was young. And when the Lazy A boys dressed up, they made an event of it.

Pie had suggested that they all go to the depot to meet her, but Idaho vetoed that, and drove away.

Omaha came from the bunkhouse, looking queer with his purple nose, which resembled a potato in contour.

"All dressed up and no place to go," complained Pie. "It's hours before the train comes in."

"And nothin' to drink on the ranch," wailed Omaha.

Mex grinned. "Your nose looks like the handle on a door."

"Thasall right," growled Omaha. "Ne' mind my dose."

"We can't gloom around here for hours, dressed thisaway," said Pie. "Suppose we go to town, keep out of Idaho's sight, and when the train whistles we can head for home."

"Your voice is tuned for my heartstrings," said Mex.

"I'm halfway there right now," said Omaha. "C'mon."

And while the three Lazy A cowboys headed for town, four other riders, "Buck" Wing, "Heinie" Moriarity, "Klondike" Evans and Joe Chevrier, of the Star X, foregathered in the Oreana Saloon with money in their pockets.

Buck Wing was a long-legged, bucktooth cowboy, with one eye slightly out of line, and one of his ears was slightly cauliflowered. Moriarity was short, broad of shoulder, typically Celtic, even to his love of battle. Klondike Evans was of medium height, bald-headed, sallow complexioned, which accentuated his wispy black mustache. Joe Chevrier was a little, red-faced French-Canadian, voluble, excitable, the butt of most of the rough jokes originated by Buck and Heinie.

The Lazy A and the Star X outfits had not met since the funeral of Jud Ault. Personally there had never been any

bad blood between the cowboys, but they had been loyal to their own outfits, respecting the ancient enmity.

Idaho Breen saw that the Star X outfit was at the Oreana, so he tied his team in front of the general store. When the Lazy A trio arrived they tied their horses at the rear of the Oreana and made their entrance through the back door.

They stopped about midway of the room, looking at the four Star X boys at the bar.

Buck Wing grinned widely. He had imbibed plenty of liquor and was mellow.

" 'Sfar as I can see," he called, "there ain't no feud left. H'yah, cowboys!"

For the first time since the feud started, Star X punchers shook hands with those from the Lazy A. After about the sixth drink, Omaha explained:

"This here Miss Ault, which the old man designates in his will-paper as bein' the one he chooses to own the Lazy A, is due to hit Oreana City this evenin'. Idaho Breen aims to take her out to the ranch. That's the reason we're all duded up thisaway. When that train toots for Oreana City, we fogs for home and lines up at the front door to welcome her."

"Perfec'ly proper," said Klondike owlishly. "My, my, I don't see how you boys ever got so stylish! I take one look at Pie Ide, and I says to myself, 'Here's a 'Piscopal preacher.' It was that collar that fooled me."

" 'Sone of mine," said Omaha. "Pie punched button-holes in it. Had to kind of lap the ends over to fit his neck."

"He sure is a dude!" applauded Buck Wing. "You're all pretty gaudy, if you ask me. Still, it's proper under the circumstances. What you say, Joe?"

JOE CHEVRIER hadn't said anything. Liquor made him just a trifle mournful. He looked gloomily at the three Lazy A punchers.

"I say not'ing," he replied. "Me, I'm jus' t'ink w'at somebody say 'bout Star X kill Lazy A beef and t'row hide in de prospec' hole."

"Drop it!" growled Heinie. "This is no time to stir up a lot of smelly cowhides!"

Frenchy was squelched, but continued to glower, and his remarks brought a decided chill over the festivities.

"I'm for buryin' any hatchet that might be around," said Pie Ide. "We might as well all be good little friends together."

"Sure thing," agreed Buck Wing. "But you know yourself, Pie, that Idaho Breen made some remarks that are hard to overlook."

"You say somet'ng true," applauded Joe.

"And I'm goin' to squish you, if you don't shut up!" snapped Heinie.

"And I'll help you," offered Omaha.

Heinie glared at Omaha. "The hell you will!"

"If you need help," amended Omaha quickly.

"I'm not scare from de Lazy A, you bet," declared Joe.

"You don't need to be, Joe," said Klondike warmly.

"Well, you can't hold us responsible for what Breen said, can you?" asked Pie Ide. "I'd crave to know if we're responsible for what our boss says, that's what I'd crave to know."

"You seems to have a cravin', cowboy," observed Buck coldly.

"Aw, you don't need to get your tonsils all swelled up," said Pie. "We came here in a peaceful mood. You're four to our three, but nobody ever seen the Lazy A—"

"Let's arbitrate," interrupted Omaha. "I'll buy a drink. We don't care if you've filled every prospect hole from here to Welcome Creek with Lazy A hides. What you drinkin', gents?"

"Are you admittin' to yourself that we has done such a thing?" Heinie hitched up his belt, his eyes snapping.

"Let's have the drink first," suggested Klondike.

Arguments were forgotten while seven men drank. Joe Chevrier threw his

glass in a cuspidor, smashing it.

"I drink no more wit' Lazy A," he declared, waving his arms. "I'm insult from w'at Breen say about de cowhide."

"Why don't some of you Star X gents kill that Frenchman?" Omaha asked expansively. "He's a menace to friendship."

" 'Oo's menace," demanded Joe belligerently. "By gosh, I no stand for dat!"

"He ain't no menace," said Klondike.

"Then why don't he forget them hides?" wailed Omaha.

"He's so honest it hurts him," explained Buck Wing thickly.

"Hurts him to be honest," said Mex. "I sabe."

"You don't *sabe* nothin'!" snorted Buck Wing.

All right, all right!" Pie Ide hitched up his belt. "I can see you Star X whippoor-wills are pinin' for battle. But we ain't in the market for no wars today. We got to remain safe and sane until our new she-boss arrives. After she's kind of inaugurated, we're respectful to anythin' hedge-hogs nominate. We meets you any old place you ain't afraid to go, and we'll let you choose your weapons!"

"If you fellers got any quantity of brawlin' to do, I wish you'd go some'ers else," said the bartender mildly.

"Who's brawlin'?" demanded Klondike. "This here is just an argument, so keep out of it."

Both sides knew that there was no chance for peace.

"All right," Omaha said. "You Star X's don't want no peace, so we'll go away. That cowhide matter don't mean nothin' to any of us. All I can say is that if you ate all the beef that was inside them hides you're plenty fat on good meat."

The three Lazy A cowboys filed out and headed down the street toward the Rawhide Saloon, just well enough organized to ignore the fact that Idaho Breen might meet them.

Back in the saloon they had left, Klondike observed:

"They ought to be teached a lesson."

"They will be." Buck Wing nodded. "I've got a scheme. That train gets in after dark, and there won't be nobody there to meet the girl except Idaho Breen. How'd it be—?" Buck scratched his chin thoughtfully. "How'd it be to swipe that girl and take her out to the Star X?"

"I'll buy a drink!" exploded Heinie. "You've spoke your piece."

IDAHO BREEN got his team from the store hitch-rack and drove to the little depot, where he left it to await the arrival of Mary Ault. Inside the depot, the agent divulged the information that the train would be about three hours late.

"I got a telegram here for Jud Ault," he said grinning. "Didn't jist know how to deliver it. Do you, Breen?"

Idaho laughed. "Maybe I better take it along. It might concern ranch business."

"Sure. Here she is. Lookin' for somebody on the train?"

Idaho pocketed the telegram. "Yeah. The new owner of the Lazy A."

Idaho walked out to his team and opened the telegram. It was from the secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, and read:

SENDING YOU BEST MAN FOR JOB WILL IDENTIFY HIMSELF AL TRAYNOR

Idaho leaned against a buggy wheel and pondered over the telegram.

"Sendin' you best man for job," he muttered. "What job? A telegram to a dead man! And Al Traynor is secretary of the Cattlemen's Association. I wonder just what job they got in mind."

He folded up the telegram and went back up the street. The sheriff was sitting in front of the general store, whittling, his eyes scanning the front of the Oreana Saloon. Idaho spoke to him, and the sheriff moved over to give him a seat.

"Your gang and the star X bunch are over there in the Oreana," offered the sheriff, pointing with his pocketknife. "They've been in there for about

fifteen minutes, and nobody ain't been throwed out yet."

Idaho scowled heavily. "All gettin' drunk, eh?"

"All *got* drunk," corrected the sheriff.

For it was just at the moment that the three Lazy A boys filed out. None of them were able to follow a chalk-line. They filed into the Rawhide, and the sheriff breathed easier.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," he said thankfully.

VI

THE SUN had gone down, and it would soon be dark. They were lighting the hanging lamps in the Oreana, when Joe Chevrier and Klondike Evans came from the place, both of them unsteady. It seemed that Klondike was trying to argue Joe out of doing something which Joe was bound and determined to do.

"I'm insult!" roared the little cow-puncher angrily, as they came across the street.

"Thasall ri'," mumbled Klondike. "You ain't got no shense. I tell you for-f'rget it, dog-gone you!"

"Ho, ho!" Joe had seen Idaho and the sheriff. He braced his feet, roaring out his war-whoop. "You sonn-of-a-gonn!"

Klondike made an ineffectual grab at Joe, who had dragged out his sixshooter, staggering out of Klondike's reach.

Wham! Wham! His bullet smashed through the window just over the heads of Idaho and the sheriff.

Two more bullets practically ruined the rest of the window, while Idaho and the sheriff, running like a team of heavy-bodied fire-horses, headed for the sheriff's office.

Another bullet struck the side of the building, as they fell through the doorway. Heinie Moriarity and Buck Wing staggered out of the Oreana, while from the Rawhide came the Lazy A boys.

Joe's fifth bullet struck the dirt just in front of Omaha, who almost fell over backward. Pie Ide drew his six-shooter and proceeded to take pot-shots at the Star X gang.

A bullet knocked off Klondike's sombrero, and when he stooped over to get it, another hunk of lead threw gravel in his face. He forgot the hat and went galloping toward the Oreana, where he caught his toe on the step and fell half-way through the doorway.

The shooting became general, except for Joe Chevrier, who was trying to stuff more cartridges into his six-shooter, but with little success. Buck Wing had run in close to the Oreana, while Heinie sat down in the street, shooting across one bended knee.

Bang! A note entirely different from that of the six-gun. Joe Chevrier yelped like an injured pup and galloped toward the far corner of the Oreana, grasping at his rear. The enraged sheriff had poked a ten-gauge shotgun through his office window, and had given the Star X Frenchman something to think about, besides loading his gun.

Heinie's gun was empty, so he crawled back to the Oreana. The Lazy A outfit had backed to the door of the Rawhide, only to find it barred against them.

"Is anybody hurt?" panted Pie Ide, as they leaned against the barred door.

"I got my mustache full of gravel!" wailed Omaha. "And some of it hit my sore nose."

"Did you see what happened to the frog-eater?" chuckled Mex. "The sheriff busted him with duck shot."

"What started it?" asked Pie, as he reloaded his long Colt .45. "Let's set on the sidewalk. Them snake-hunters are too drunk to hit a house, and it'll soon be dark."

"You didn't see us hittin' anythin, did you?" inquired Omaha, pawing at his mustache.

"We fanned 'em out of the street, didn't we?" jeered Mex. "You want to kill 'em, Omaha?"

"Well, I didn't want to kiss 'em. Let's sneak around and get in the back door of the sheriff's office."

"And get a hidefull of duck shot, eh?" Pie Ide shook his head so hard that his

hat fell off.

In the Oreana the Star X boys leaned against the bar. Klondike was bitter. His fairly new Stetson had a jagged hole in the crown.

"Well, what started it, anyway?" demanded Buck Wing.

"Joe Chevrier took a shot at Idaho Breen and the sheriff."

"Danged fool!"

Joe came through the rear doorway, limping. He had sobered considerably.

"By gar, I'm get stoong by fortee bee!" he exclaimed. "Behin' me I'm feel like de centi-peed walk h'all over me."

"You got a load of duck shot!" snorted Buck Wing disgustedly. "It's too damn bad he didn't use a cannon. What made you start shootin' out there, Canuck? You sure put us in bad."

"Well"—Joe grimaced painfully—"I'm see dat Ida-hoo, and I'm so insult about de cowhide."

"We might go and apologize," suggested Heinie. "The Lazy A boys prob'ly are in the Rawhide."

BUT THAT didn't go well with Buck Wing. Except for the bartender, they had the Oreana all to themselves. Other patrons had sneaked out the back door and had given the main street a wide berth. The bartender, while still sticking to the ship, did not feel any too secure.

"I don't apologize to nobody," declared Buck. "If Joe wants to apologize to Idaho and the sheriff—"

"She don't!" snorted Joe. "I'm ver' sore jus' now."

"I'd suggest that we go home," said Klondike, still mourning over his sombrero.

"And let the Lazy A think they run us out?"

"What they don't know won't hurt 'em. C'mon."

The Lazy A bunch, sitting like three buzzards on the sidewalk, saw the Star X boys ride away and chuckled with glee. Idaho Breen and the disgruntled sheriff breathed sighs of relief.

"We whipped 'em!" declared Mex.

"We sure did, by golly!" chuckled Omaha. "Here comes Idaho and the sheriff. I suppose they're comin' to congratulate us."

But Idaho Breen was not in a congratulatory frame of mind.

"Why in hell didn't you fellers stay at the ranch and behave yourselves?" he demanded angrily. "Comin' here and startin' trouble!"

"Who started any trouble?" grunted Pie Ide. "If we hadn't been here to turn the tide you and the sheriff would of had another Alamo."

"You fellers started it! You mixed with that Star X outfit in the Oreana!"

"Well, what you goin' to do about it?" asked Omaha. "Is this a free country or not?"

Idaho debated. Good cowhands were not plentiful. He knew he was on the verge of losing all three of them.

"Well," he said slowly, "I suppose it's all right. But I didn't want you boys drunk when Miss Ault comes. Cuss it, she prob'ly ain't used to drunken punchers."

"Who's drunk?" demanded Omaha.

Idaho shook his head. "I—I was judgin' from the shootin' that you wasn't cold sober."

"Oh, we didn't want to kill 'em," said Pie Ide. "All we wanted to do was to scare 'em out of town, so they'd let you and the sheriff out of the office."

"My shotgun settled that," said the sheriff, panting heavily. "Joe Chevrier'll itch for a long time."

"There ain't no fun left, anyway," said Mex mournfully. "I'd just as soon go home."

"Same here." Omaha nodded. "We was just killin' time, anyway."

The Lazy A boys mounted their horses and headed for home. Idaho tried to find Miles Lane, but the lawyer was not in evidence. The town had recovered its composure, after the bloodless battle, but there was much speculation as to what would happen the next time the two outfits met.

It was almost time for the train to arrive when Idaho went to the depot. He walked around the building with the intention of changing the position of his half-broke buggy team, which might get frightened at the train. But as he swung around the corner, three or four men piled upon him, bearing him down by sheer weight of numbers. An old saddle-blanket was flung over his head, and in two minutes Idaho Breen was trussed up like a mummy, and dumped unceremoniously behind the depot.

The train ground ponderously up to the station, and when Mary Smith climbed down the steps, assisted by the gray-haired conductor, she was met by Buck Wing and Klondike Evans of the Star X. Behind her came Cultus Collins, apparently paying no attention to her.

"Howdy," greeted Buck Wing, a half smile on his face. "Are you Miss Ault?"

"Why, yes," said Mary, who was prepared to be "alias anything she was called."

Klondike grasped her suitcase, and Buck guided her to the hitch-rack where the frightened team was being taken care of by Heinie and Joe. Mary noted a strong smell of liquor.

Klondike, who was to do the driving, got in and took the lines, while Heinie and Joe clung to the bridles of the rearing broncos.

"Head for the ranch," said Buck. "We'll catch yuh."

"You'll go some, if you do!" snorted Klondike.

The team whirled around, almost upsetting the buggy, and went up the main street of Oreana City like a pair of racehorses heading for the wire.

MARY got little view of Oreana City, as she was entirely occupied in clinging to the seat of the open buggy. The road was far from smooth, and they went bouncing off the street into a wide sweep of low hills, gray and blue in the starlight. Klondike clung to the frail lines, content to keep the running team in the road.

The light buggy meant nothing to the broncos running wild, cold-jawed. A mile or more reeled out behind them. Klondike knew of a bad spot in the road, where a washout had cut a deep furrow across the highway. To go into this at top speed would mean a smashup. He shortened his lines, braced his feet and pulled steadily. But the cold-jawed broncs did not mind the pull on the straight-bar bits.

Klondike, still half drunk, realized that things were not working out just right. He shot a glance at the girl beside him. She was clinging to the seat with both hands. He surged back on the lines again. He knew the washout was close now.

Snap! The left line broke and came back, striking Klondike in the chest, and throwing all the pull on the right line. It swerved the team to the right, and a wheel went over a mesquite snag, throwing Klondike off the seat.

Just beyond where they were a road turned to the right; an old road, which had not been used for years. The buggy slewed around, skidded dangerously, and then straightened up, as the frantic team headed up the old road.

Mary was thrown off the seat and down against the dash, but managed to get back to the seat. Her mind was in a whirl as she realized that the driver had been thrown out of the vehicle and that the horses were running away. She wanted to jump, but realized the danger. The buggy was careening over the old road, possibly half a mile from where Klondike had been thrown out, when the team whirled suddenly, throwing Mary off into a patch of brush, and headed back in the general direction of the Star X, cutting across country.

The cause of their sudden turn was a lone horseman, who had appeared suddenly just a few yards ahead of them. The team was almost into him when it turned, and Mary narrowly missed being thrown against his horse. The horse whirled wildly, but he reined it back, dismounted swiftly and ran to the girl.

With little difficulty he disentangled her from the bush, which had broken her fall, and laid her on the ground. Her rescuer was Dude Wheeler, who had been cutting across country toward the Star X. On his face was a mixture of wonder and astonishment as he scratched a match and looked down into the frightened eyes of a strange girl.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

She did not say—merely blinked at the match, which burned Dude's fingers before he dropped it.

"I—I don't think I'm hurt—much," she said, as he scratched another match. She managed to sit up and he braced her with one arm. "I guess I—I'm badly shaken," she admitted.

"I'll bet you are. How did you happen to be up here all alone with a runaway team?"

"Why, I don't know exactly, the driver fell off, you see."

"Yeah, I see—that much."

Dude Wheeler was lighting more matches, to get a better look at this girl.

"Who was the driver?" he asked.

Mary shook her head. "I don't know. I just came in on the train tonight."

"In on the train?" echoed Dude. He looked at her closer. "Say, are you Miss Ault?"

"Why—er—yes," said Mary.

The matches burned out, and Dude did not light another.

"I see," he said slowly.

VII

DUDE got to his feet and stood there, gazing across the hills.

"You're a long ways from the Lazy A," he said to Mary Smith. "I don't know what—I wonder—that was a Lazy A team. You don't know who the driver was?"

"No, I have no idea. They just put me in the buggy, and the team ran away."

"I'm Jack Wheeler, Miss Ault. From the Star X outfit."

"I—I think I've hurt my ankle, Mr. Wheeler."

"I reckon you got off lucky, if that's all."

He helped her to her feet, but she was unable to walk.

"It's a long ways to the Lazy A," Dude repeated slowly. "I oughtn't to take you to the Star X, but it's the nearest place. Can you stand alone until I get my bronc?"

Mary clung to the brush, while he led his horse up to her.

"You can't ride a horse in that skirt," he told her.

"No, I suppose not," admitted Mary. "What will we do?"

"And if I set you sideways on that saddle and got on behind you, we'd prob'ly both get throwed off, because that bronc ain't broke to pack double. I reckon there's just one thing to do."

He swung her up and got into the saddle with her, holding her in his arms.

"But you can't carry me like this!" she protested.

"This is evidence against your idea," he said, as he rode off through the hills. "If you can stand it, I sure can, miss."

Back on the road where Klondike had been turned from the buggy, he had landed just hard enough to daze him for a minute or more. When he recovered sufficiently to realize what had happened, the team was too far away for him even to hear it. He was in the road when Buck Wing, Joe Chevrier and Heinie Moriarity came galloping up the road, leading Klondike's horse. They drew up and considered Klondike, who was still half speechless from his fall.

"What happened?" panted Buck. "Where's the team?"

"Gone," Klondike puffed heavily and flapped his arms helplessly. "Th-throwed me out! Line busted."

"She'll be killed!" blurted Heinie.

"Already killed, I'll bet!" exploded Buck. "Get on your bronc, Klondike! We've got to head 'em off."

Klondike lurched into the saddle.

"Head nothin'! They're miles away and goin' strong. I couldn't even check 'em."

But no one was listening to him; they were spurring ahead as fast as their horses could run.

"Watch for her along the road!" yelled Buck.

Their horses never slackened until they reached the big gate of the Star X, where they found the buggy, almost wrapped around one of the gate posts. Inside the yard were the horses. One had lost all its harness except the collar and limped badly. The other seemed to be all right.

The boys dropped off their horses, cold sober now, but there was no sign of the girl. Sadly they mounted and rode back toward town, searching carefully, afraid of finding the girl dead.

"They'll hang us," wailed Klondike.

"You get 'bout feefty shot in de hin'-side, and you not scare from hang," declared Joe, who rode standing up in his stirrups.

"It was a fool thing for us to do," complained Buck.

"It was your idea, Buck," retorted Klondike.

"You suggested ridin' a circle and comin' back to the depot, remember. Don't lay it all onto me."

"She was a danged pretty girl, too," said Klondike. "I got a good look at her."

"Sure, and pulled all on one line."

"Aw, let up on him, Buck," said Heinie. "Dude will fire all of us, so we might as well go to town, get drunk and take our medicine. If there ever was four bigger fools, I'd like to see what they look like. . ."

AFTER Mary Smith had left Cultus Collins at the train, he walked from the depot and got a room at the Oreana hotel, then went to the Oreana Saloon. The sheriff and Miles Lane were at the bar, talking with the bartender, who was explaining the argument between the Lazy A and the Star X. Cultus sat down at a table and picked up a newspaper.

"I wasn't here to see the fun," laughed Lane. "Lucky that no one was hurt, except Joe Chevrier. Those few shot probably won't hurt him much. Do you know if Miss Ault came in tonight?"

"I think so," said the sheriff. "Idaho was here to meet her, and I saw his outfit go out of town on the run. Just got a flash of the buggy, but I think the girl was in it. Idaho was drivin' a half-broke team."

"Joe Chevrier said he had been stung by forty bees," chuckled the bartender.

Lane turned to Cultus. "Have a drink with us, stranger?"

Cultus came up to the bar.

"My name is Jones," he said. "From Oklahoma."

"Mine is Lane." The lawyer introduced Cultus to the others. "Did you come in on the train tonight?"

"Yeah." Cultus nodded.

"Did a lady get off here?"

"Yeah. I think her name was Ault. I talked with her a little."

"A niece of old man Ault, who died a while back," said the sheriff.

Cultus squinted at his glass. He had a letter of introduction to a dead man, it seemed.

"She inherited the Lazy A Ranch," offered the sheriff.

"She didn't say anythin' about it," said Cultus thoughtfully. "A nice girl, I thought."

"She'll be rich." The sheriff backed against the bar, holding his glass. "That Lazy A is worth a mint of money."

"Cattle?" asked Cultus.

"Gold. The old man could have sold out for a million, but he hated holes in the ground. Queer old jigger."

"Have you ever been here before?" asked Lane curiously.

Cultus shook his head. "No. Kind of lookin' over the cattle crop for a Chicago packer."

"Oh, I see. You—"

Lane's question was interrupted by the entrance of Idaho Breen. He was hatless, a smear of blood was across his mouth, and a livid scratch over his right eye. He lurched against the bar.

"Give me a drink!" he snorted angrily. "Here, give me that bottle!" He grasped the bottle and took a heavy swig, probably the biggest drink ever taken in the Oreana.

Idaho slammed the bottle back on the bar, and tried to blink the tears out of his eyes.

"That's what I'd call a snifter," observed the sheriff.

"Sa-a-y!" Idaho pounded on the bar with both hands. "I was assaulted by several men a while ago. They hog-tied me and left me back of the depot. The agent happened to find me. My team's gone—the girl's gone!"

"You was?" exclaimed the sheriff. "Why I seen your buggy go up the street just after the train came in."

"Are you sure?" choked Idaho.

"Yeah. It was goin' kind of fast, but I'm sure I seen a woman in it, Idaho."

Idaho struck the top of the bar with his fist. "That damn' Star X outfit! They laid for me, and stole the girl!"

"Who was the girl they stole?" asked Cultus.

Idaho glared at him. "Who are you?"

"This is Mr. Jones of Oklahoma," said the sheriff. "Mr. Jones, this is Mr. Breen, foreman of the Lazy A."

"The girl they stole," said Idaho, not offering Cultus his hand, "was the new owner of the Lazy A outfit!"

"The one that came in on the train with you," said the sheriff.

"Oh, that one."

"Did you see her get off the train?" Idaho asked quickly. "Who met her? What'd they look like?"

CULTUS grinned widely.

"It was dark, and I didn't pay much attention."

"It has been over an hour since the train came in," said Lane.

"Just why would the Star X steal that girl?" asked Cultus.

"Because they hate the Lazy A!" snorted Idaho. "We had a regular battle in the street tonight. Nobody got killed. I suppose both sides were too drunk to shoot straight. They'd do anything, them dirty coyotes. I'm goin' out to the Star X and get that girl!"

"Think about it a while," advised the sheriff. "Them boys won't eat her. They was all drunk, Idaho, and their idea of a good joke would be to steal the owner of the Lazy A."

"Dirty cow thieves!" Idaho was mad.

"Don't let Dude Wheeler hear you say that," said the sheriff.

"Bad medicine?" asked Cultus.

"Bad enough to resent a thing like that."

Idaho reached for the bottle and took another drink, as a cowboy from one of the small ranches south of Oreana came in. He nodded pleasantly.

"I was wonderin' if any of the Lazy A gang were in town," he said, grinning. "The Star X outfit are down in the Rawhide."

"Down in the Rawhide?" asked Idaho. "How long have they been down there?"

"Well, I heard the bartender tell 'em the Lazy A thought they'd run 'em out of town, and the Star X boys said they hadn't never left town."

Idaho glared thoughtfully.

"Did the agent see the girl get off the train?" Lane asked him.

Idaho shook his head. "He said he didn't."

"I reckon Mr. Jones of Oklahoma here is the only one that's sure she ever came," observed the sheriff.

"I saw *a* girl get off," corrected Cultus.

Miles Lane cleared his throat softly. "If I were in your place, Idaho, I'd go home and sleep on it. I don't think that girl is in any danger of being hurt, and you can't do a thing tonight."

The sheriff nodded. "Tomorrow mornin', if she ain't showed up, I'll go with yuh to the Star X," he promised.

"Yeah, and I'll take my whole outfit," flared Idaho. "Now I've got to hire a horse to ride home on." He stamped out of the saloon, and they heard him going down the rickety sidewalk, heading for the livery stable.

Cultus went back to the hotel, puzzling over what had become of Mary. He could have described the two men who had met her at the train, but had decided not to. He could identify Buck Wing and Klondike Evans any time, and Cultus wanted to know more before he told anybody what he knew. . . .

Out at the Star X, Dude Wheeler saw the wreck of the Lazy A buggy when he rode through the gate with Mary in his arms. The two horses were down near a corral, so the runaway team must have cut back to the road.

He drew up at the ranchhouse porch and dismounted, still carrying Mary.

"Your arms must be paralyzed," she said.

"Well—" he laughed—"you're not as light as you were when I first picked you up."

He carried her on into the house.

VIII

IN THE Star X ranchhouse the living room was commodious, rough finished, with a huge fireplace on one side. The floor was strewn with Navajo rugs, and many of the chair seats and backs were of cowhide, untanned. It was a typical man's abode. A gun-rack was filled with rifles. Loose cartridges, a heavy Colt revolver, a coil of rope, tobacco and dog-eared magazines were scattered over the rough center table. In front of the fireplace was the pelt of a grizzly bear, while over the mantel was a huge elk head, with magnificent antlers.

Mary gazed around, after Dude had placed her in their easiest chair.

"I'll get some hot water," he said. "And some liniment. You take it easy, and I'll fix you up."

Mary watched the tall, straight cowboy leave the room, and sank back with a sigh, wondering what would happen next. Life certainly had been adventurous since she had met Cultus Collins. She had no idea just what she was to do in Oreana City, so thinking it over calmly was impossible. She was an impostor. And whether she could carry out the deception remained to be seen.

Old Eph Wheeler, clad in an old red undershirt, overalls and mismated woolen socks came into the room. The old man's sparse hair was standing straight up, and his face in the lamplight looked thin. He squinted at her, glanced toward the kitchen, where Dude was noisily poking wood in the stove, then came a little closer.

"Just who might you be?" he asked curiously. "I thought I must be dreamin' when I heard a woman's voice out here."

"I am Mary Ault," said Mary bravely.

The old man's mouth dropped open, but he did not speak. He frowned, shifted his feet.

"Mind sayin' that again?" he asked.

Mary repeated the name as Dude came in from the kitchen. He stopped short when he saw his father.

"Did we wake you up, Dad?" he asked. "This is Miss Ault."

"That's what she said," said the old man. "Where'd you pick her up?"

Dude explained about the runaway. He didn't know who had been driving the team, and Mary didn't know.

"It's a Lazy A rig," said Dude. "Blue buggy with red wheels. It's wrapped around one of our gate posts outside. The horses are down by the corral. I can't imagine what a Lazy A rig would be doin' out here."

"My suitcase was in it," said Mary.

Dude walked out, and came back with the suitcase, which was none the worse for the runaway. The old man sat down and watched Mary, while she soaked her swollen ankle in hot water.

"So Jud Ault was your uncle, eh?" he remarked. "Know him?"

"No," said Mary. She hadn't the slightest idea who Jud Ault was.

"He was an old coyote."

Mary flinched. She was evidently not related to a saint.

"He turned his own daughter out," went on the old man.

"Dad, I don't reckon she cares to

know all this," Dude said softly.

"Well, she ought to. Anyway, she might as well hear it from me, 'cause she's goin' to hear it sooner or later."

"That liniment will take a lot of the soreness out," said Dude. "I'll soak a bandage and—"

"You're takin' a lot of pains with an Ault," said the old man. "Been packin' a Winchester for 'em for years and now you're wrappin' up their ankles."

Dude flushed, but Mary laughed, because she did not realize how serious had been the hatred between the two ranches.

"What's a Winchester?" she asked.

"A gun," said Dude. His hand trembled slightly and he spilled a little liniment.

"Do all men carry guns out here?" she asked.

Dude looked up at her, his eyes serious. "Most of 'em do."

"Tell me about Jud Ault turning his daughter out."

"It's true." Dude did not look up at her again. "She married a gambler. Some say he was also a lawyer, but he didn't practice law here. Old Jud Ault wouldn't speak to her again. She lives in Oreana City, with her little boy."

"Didn't he leave her anything when he died?"

"A dollar."

"And the ranch is worth a million, they say," growled the old man. "You're sure lucky."

"I—I don't know much about it," faltered Mary.

"Lane sent for you, I reckon. He made out Jud Ault's will."

"Yes," said Mary, because she didn't know what else to say.

DUDE finished bandaging the ankle, and the old man turned to him.

"You better harness up the team and take her back to the hotel, Dude."

They looked at each other for moments.

"That might be the best thing to do," Dude said slowly then. "I'll hitch up."

He went out, and Mary curled up on the big chair, her chin in her hand. She did not like the old man, who filled his pipe and smoked noisily.

"You'll sell the Lazy A, won't you?" he asked, not unkindly.

Mary shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Wheeler."

"Runnin' a ranch ain't no woman's job." He pulled on his pipe. "Of course, you might marry."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Huh! That's about all most girls think about!"

"Do they?"

Eph Wheeler threw his pipe on the table, with a grunt of disgust. "I'm glad you're goin' back to town! I hate an argument. I wish Dude would hurry with that team. You make me mad. You remind me of Jud Ault."

Mary laughed at him, and he stalked from the room, swearing under his breath. He did not put in an appearance when Dude carried her out to the buggy, and Dude did not mention him until they were well on their way to Oreana City.

The moon was up now, and the hills were bathed in a silver glow; blue in the depths, and silver where the moonlight brushed the ridges; a mystic fairyland, where the moon and stars came down close to the world. Mary leaned back and looked at a world she had never seen before.

"Isn't it beautiful!" she said simply.

"Yes'm, it is," said Dude. "I never get tired of these hills at night. The rough edges are all gone. Lots of nights I just ride into the hills, ride 'way back on the ridges. It's like goin' away from the rest of the world. Say, I'm sorry Dad talked like he did. But he's old, and he hates the Lazy A. There are no women at the Star X. Pretty soon our four cowpunchers will be driftin' home from town, loaded to the gills with liquor, and it might not be a nice place for a lady—the Star X ranch. You'll be better off at the hotel. I'm glad you've got your suitcase."

"It's a wonder it didn't get smashed."

"And you, too."

"I'm sorry to have put you to all this trouble, Mr. Wheeler. I just can't imagine what would have happened to me, if you hadn't met that runaway."

"Well, it was kind of lucky. About a hundred yards beyond where you was throwed out, there's a deep washout. It's about thirty feet across—and there ain't no road."

"You mean a deep rut?"

"It's about twenty feet deep."

Mary shuddered. "I'm glad I met you."

"Well, so am I," said Dude softly. "And it wasn't any trouble, so you don't need to thank me."

"But you hate the Ault family."

"I just wonder if I do. This hate never got me anythin'. You and Faith are the only Aults I know, and I don't hate either of yuh."

"Faith?"

"Jud Ault's daughter. There's the lights of Oreana City. The hotel ain't no great place, but it's all right. You'll prob'ly go out to the Lazy A tomorrow."

They drove up to the hotel. Dude carried her suitcase in and Mary was able to limp slowly along. The proprietor, reading by the light of a smoky old oil lamp, stared over his glasses at her.

"Give Miss Ault your best room, Charley," said Dude. "She's only goin' to be here one night."

"Sure, sure! Miss Ault, huh? Looks like old Jud, eh? Know her any place. You don't need to register. We never had but one book, and somebody stole it. I suppose they was collectin' horse-thieves' autographs."

The old man bent double over his stock joke, grabbed the lamp in one hand, the suitcase in the other and led the way down a narrow hall.

"I'll put you in the president's sweet," he chuckled. "It's the only one that the wash-bowl ain't cracked."

Dude went outside. There was plenty of noise in the Oreana, so he went over. Klondike, Buck, Heinie and Joe were there, decidedly drunk. They goggled at him owlishly, sobering a trifle. Buck invited him to have a drink, but he declined.

A SUDDEN notion struck him, and he took Buck by the arm.

"I want to talk to you, Buck," he said.

Buck held back. "Now listen, Dude. You've—"

"Not in here," whispered Dude. "Come outside."

"Oh, all right. Shay, now lissen—"

Dude drew him outside the saloon and braced him against the wall.

"I know whasha want," said Buck knowingly. "I didn't know Klondike was gonna busht the lines. It's an awful thing, ol'-timer. She mush of been killed. She—"

"You stole that girl, did you, Buck?"

"Oh, yesh. Firs' we had a fight with the Lazy A, and the sheriff shot Joe in the pants with a sh-shotgun. Ter'ble! Idaho Breen wash in it, too. Oh, cert'nly! So we tied him up in an old saddle-blanket and stole the girl. We admit it. Cert'nly, we do. We can't deny it. 'S too bad, but it's done, Dude."

"Who knows about it, except you four, Buck?"

"Thasall."

"Did Idaho recognize you?"

"'F he did, he's a good li'l recognizer"

"Then don't say anythin' about it, Buck. They can't prove it on you, so keep still."

"You mean that, Dude?" Buck goggled owlishly.

"Sure I mean it."

"Is—is that girl dead?"

"Not hardly, Buck."

"Oh, my, thash good. Mush obliged, Dude. An' you ain't goin' to fire ush?"

Dude laughed softly. "No, Buck, I think not. Maybe I'll thank you instead. Go back and finish up your job."

Buck weaved back to the bar, where the other three boys awaited a verdict. Buck leaned against the bar, poured out a drink, a vacant sag to his lower lip.

"What'd Dude want?" gurgled Klondike.

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" Buck sagged back on his heels. "It's a shecret. Dude says to keep our mouth shut."

"Zasso?" Heinie nodded solemnly. "Does Dude know about it?"

"Shertenly does," said Buck. "Oh, shertenly he does."

"And he wasn't awful mad, Buck? Didn't fire us?"

"Nossir. He—he con-con-congratulated ush."

"By gosh, dat's fine!" exploded Joe. "My min' is relieve, but I'm still got de li'l duck shot in de skin."

"Dude wasn't drunk?" queried Klondike.

"Jus' as shober as—as we are," declared Buck.

"Then it's all right. Here's happy days, gents."

IX

WHEN Idaho Breen and his three cowboys rode into Oreana City early the next morning, each man carried a rifle in a scabbard, and an extra belt of cartridges. The Lazy A was prepared for war. Sheriff Cleve Sears sighed mournfully when he saw them. He wanted to be fair with both sides, even if Joe Chevrier had tried to kill him the previous evening.

Idaho rode up to the sheriff's office and briskly stated his intention of going out to the Star X and demanding the girl and an explanation.

"And you better come along, Cleve," he said. "To see we get a square deal."

"No-o-up." The sheriff shook his head. "In the first place, you don't know they took her. Last night your outfit staged a battle with the Star X; and now if you go out there, all heeled for a scrap, you'll get it, Idaho. I'm not goin' to back your play. If you kill some of the Star X, that's ag'in the law, and all hell can't save you from swingin'. Better do quite a lot of thinkin' about it, Idaho."

It was a long speech for Cleve Sears to make, and it left him gasping for breath. It also left Idaho breathless.

"Are you backin' the Star X?" he demanded.

"I'm not backin' anybody! Joe Chevrier tried to kill you or me. But that was last night."

"But I want to find the girl!" wailed Idaho. "I'm not lookin' for a war, Cleve. That girl was stolen, and I've got a charge of horse-stealin' ag'in the man who took my team. There ain't no law against killin' a horse thief."

"Ain't never been no law ag'in it," said the sheriff slowly. "When you're sure you've got the right man."

"Well, I don't think you're playin' square, Cleve."

Idaho joined his men in front of the Rawhide Saloon, where they sat down to debate their next move. The sheriff went on to the hotel dining room for his breakfast. He was just making an attack on a platter of ham and eggs, when Mary limped into the room and sat down.

Cleve Sears stared at her, found it difficult to concentrate on breakfast. She paid no attention to him, but ordered her own breakfast from the hotel proprietor, who asked her how her leg was this morning.

"Much better, thank you." She smiled.

"Don't mention it, Miss Ault. Want your eggs lookin' up, or blind?"

"I don't think I know what you mean."

"Leave 'em as they lay, or turned over, ma'am?"

"Oh, as they lay." Mary laughed.

As the man shuffled away the sheriff hurried outside to where Idaho and his men were debating.

"If you're lookin' for a Miss Ault, she's eatin' breakfast in the hotel," announced Sheriff Sears.

Idaho blinked rapidly. "How'd she get there?"

"I didn't ask her," said the sheriff coldly. "Me, I think you was drunk and didn't meet the train."

"No such a damn thing! I tell you—oh, well, I don't care what you think."

As they all filed over to the hotel,

Miles Lane was coming down the street. He was surprised at the news and anxious to see the girl. The four cowboys stayed in the hotel lobby, while the sheriff, Idaho and Lane went into the dining room.

Miles Lane introduced himself, Idaho, and the sheriff. Mary had finished breakfast, so Lane asked her to go to his office with him and Idaho.

"You've got your credentials, ain't you?" asked Idaho.

Mary produced the letter Cultus Collins had given her. Lane glanced through it, nodding.

"Cleve," he said to the sheriff, "I wish you'd get old Judge Mears and bring him to my office. I'd like to have him there when we read the will."

THE sheriff turned away, and Lane led the way to his office, ignoring the three cowpunchers, who were anxious to meet the girl. In the office, Lane closed the door and motioned Mary to a seat. Idaho lounged against the closed door, looking speculatively at Mary.

"This letter says to keep you away from liquor," Lane said seriously. "Maybe you understand that."

"Yes," Mary said softly.

"I'll say Loring was a good picker." Lane laughed. "How much did he tell you about this deal?"

"Not much." Mary glanced at the floor.

"All right. You'd fool anybody, my dear. I was afraid Loring might send a hard-boiled female."

"You can't tell by the label," said Idaho.

"That's true." Lane moved closer to Mary and lowered his voice. "I don't know how much Loring told you, but what you don't know won't hurt you. Just do as we say, and you'll get your money. Is that plain?"

Mary nodded, not trusting her voice.

"All right. We'll read that will as soon as the men get here, then you'll go out to the Lazy A. And remember, you are Mary Ault as long as you are here. You play square, and you'll get your profit."

"And if she don't—" Idaho Breen hesitated.

"We won't discuss such a remote possibility, Idaho. Now, Mary, will you please tell us what happened to you last night?"

"Why," faltered Mary, "a man met me at the train, put me in a buggy, and the team ran away. Another man found me and brought me to the hotel. I hurt my ankle, but it's better this morning."

"Would you know these men if you seen 'em?" asked Idaho.

Mary shook her head quickly. "It was too dark."

"Hear any names?"

"No—except the man who brought me in. His name was Wheeler."

"Dude Wheeler, eh?" Idaho laughed harshly.

He dropped the subject, because the sheriff and old Judge Mears were coming in. The cowboys from the Lazy A also crowded in and listened to Miles Lane read the will of Jud Ault. With the exception of one dollar, the entire Lazy A property was left to his niece, Mary Ault, his brother's only child—an orphan. The will had been witnessed by Idaho Breen and Pie Ide.

As they came from the office, Cultus Collins met them near the door. He nodded pleasantly to everyone. Idaho asked Pie Ide to go to the livery stable for a rig to take Mary out to the ranch.

Cultus moved in close to Idaho. "I'd like to speak to you on a little business matter," he said.

Idaho squinted at him narrowly, as they moved down the street away from the crowd. Cultus drew out the letter he had brought to Jud Ault, and let Idaho read it.

"Now, I don't know what it's all about," confessed Cultus. "It seems I've arrived too late, but maybe you know what the old man wanted done."

Idaho's eyes hardened slightly. "I don't know just what—oh, yeah." He looked at Cultus, a half smile on his lips.

"You see, we've been losin' a lot of cattle. Just a while ago I found a lot of Lazy A hides in a prospect hole about three miles from our ranch. Somebody has been killin' our stock, and the old man was worried about it. There's been bad blood between our outfit and the Star X for years, and that bothered him, too. If you can clean up all this cattle stealin', you're a wonder. Do you think you can?"

Cultus smiled widely. "I'll try."

"Fine!" Idaho fairly beamed.

"You better give me a job on the Lazy A," suggested Cultus. "It would kind of mask my real work."

Idaho rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Yeah. You ain't got no horse here, have you? No? Well, put your stuff in the buggy, and you can drive Miss Ault out to the ranch. We'll ride along with you."

"But I ain't got nothin' to take along. Maybe I better buy a couple of shirts."

"Get what yuh need. Ide will be here with the buggy in a few minutes."

CULTUS nodded and headed for the store, while Idaho went back and showed Miles the telegram, which had been sent to Jud Ault. Then he told Miles about the letter of introduction Cultus had from the secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, and of how he was going to keep the man out at the Lazy A, to hunt rustlers.

"His name is Jones, isn't it?" asked Lane.

"That's the name he gave last night. The letter he had didn't mention any names. But Jones or not Jones, I'll have him where I can watch him all the time. Say, Miles, how do yuh like our heiress?"

"She sure fits the part. Why, you'd almost take her for a decent girl."

Idaho grinned. "Loring knew what we needed. The only thing that worries me is that Loring can demand more money. He knows too much."

"Let him try anything and I'll send him to the penitentiary for life," growled Lane. "Here comes the rig."

They helped Mary into the buggy, while one of the boys got her suitcase from the hotel. She gave Lane the check for the trunk, and Idaho promised to send a wagon after it. Cultus came from the store, carrying a bundle, and Idaho motioned for him to take the lines. Lane introduced Mary, and Cultus smiled.

"I met Miss Ault on the train," he said.

"We'll lead the way," said Idaho. "Head straight out of town and take the road that leads to the left."

Cultus drove slowly along while the men crossed the street and mounted their horses.

"Hang onto your nerve," he cautioned Mary. "I'm goin' to stay at the Lazy A and hunt rustlers. I had to show my hand, in order to keep an eye on you, Mary Elizabeth. This is a game, but it's a dangerous pastime. Be careful what you say to me."

Mary looked straight ahead as the cowboys rode in close to them.

"Your name is Jones, ain't it?" said Idaho, leaning from his saddle.

Cultus nodded. "Bill Jones, to be exact."

"From Oklahoma?"

"That's the place."

Idaho straightened in his saddle, and there was a smile on his lips. He didn't know it, but there was also a smile on the lips of Jones of Oklahoma.

Old Jud Ault had had little pride in appearances, and had been satisfied to let the Lazy A run down. The old ranchhouse was half adobe and with two stories. It was a decidedly livable place, but not much to look at. A wide veranda extended the width of the front, on the ground level, with the old flagged floor which had been laid many years ago still intact. The big living room was much the same as that of the Star X, and in it was the same masculine flavor.

Wang Lung, a wizen-faced old Celestial, presided over the culinary end of the Lazy A. He had been with the Lazy A for years, and was known as "Hop," for no reason at all.

He accepted the advent of Mary and Cultus without comment. They kept strictly out of his department. He was jealous of his kitchen, and woe to anyone who intruded.

On the ride home, Idaho Breen had told the boys confidentially that Bill Jones, of Oklahoma, was an Association detective. Cowboys, as a rule, do not care much for range detectives, but this rangy, homely specimen, with the solemn visage, rather amused them. But he had no difficulty falling into the routine.

X

PIE IDE tried to frame up some practical jokes to play on the range detective in their midst, but discarded each idea shortly after its inception.

"I just can't do it," he confided to Omaha one morning, as they sat on the top pole of the corral together. "I get a swell idea for a joke on him, and then I can't seem to pull it off. He looks at me with them funny eyes, and I—you know how the hair raises up on the back of a dog when it's scared? That's the way I kind of crinkle."

"You ain't scared of him, are you?" Omaha smoothed his mustache and stared at Pie Ide.

The tall cowboy shook his head. "It ain't exactly bein' scared, Omaha. But somethin' tells me that he knows all about that joke. He looks at me just as though he knowed what I was thinkin' about."

"Aw, he ain't so smart," said Omaha. "He's been here a week and he ain't done nothin'—much."

"He was over to that prospect hole, where Idaho found them hides. I asked him what he thought of 'em, and he just says, 'I think the cows that wore all them hides are dead.' "

Omaha snorted. "He sure is a detective!"

"Idaho don't think much of him," said Pie. "I heard him ask Jones how long he figured the Lazy A was goin' to pay him a salary, if he didn't do some detectin'. Idaho asks him how he goes about findin' a rustler, and he says he usually tried to put himself in the place of the rustler. Idaho says, 'Well, have you done it? Jones says he has, and he says, 'Now maybe I'll put myself in the cow's place, and work it out from that angle.' "

"I think Jones is a plain fool," said Omaha.

"I think," said Pie slowly, "that is just what Jones of Oklahoma wants us to think. Omaha, the Association ain't in the habit of sendin' fools on a job."

"Huh! I never seen a cow detective that had sense enough to pour sand out of a boot."

Pie lifted his head and squinted toward the main gate. "Here comes Miles Lane. Omaha, I'm beginnin' to suspect he's stuck on our new boss."

"Danged fool!" growled Omaha.

Pie laughed softly. "Lots of fools around. Even Cleve Sears, our estimable sheriff, ain't losin' no chances to come out here."

Idaho Breen met Miles Lane at the front door.

"Well, what do you know?" asked Idaho.

Miles produced several pieces of mail, among which was a letter directed to Mary Ault. Idaho put it in his pocket, and the front door was closed behind them.

"That letter was mailed in Oreana City," observed Lane.

Idaho walked to the far end of the veranda, followed by the lawyer, took out the letter and tore open the flap. It read:

My dear Miss Ault:

By this time you probably realize that there is little friendship lost between your ranch and mine, but there is no reason why we cannot be friends. I can't come to see you at the Lazy A, but I do want to see you again. Can't you meet me in town? Just drop me a note, and make it soon.

Sincerely yours,
Jack Wheeler

Idaho snorted disgustedly and tore the letter into shreds, scattering them

in the breeze.

"Not going to give it to her, eh?" queried Lane.

"Don't look like it, does it? Dude Wheeler's got a lot of nerve! I'd like to see him moonin' around here!"

Lane laughed softly. "She's a pretty girl."

Idaho looked at Lane closely. "You ain't lettin' that bother you, are you?"

Lane flushed slightly. "Not a bit."

"Well," said Idaho, "you better not, Miles. I'll be glad when she's out of here. I can't get any work out of three fool punchers, who insist on wearin' collars and takin' baths."

"How about Jones of Oklahoma?"

Idaho grinned. "That poor fool. I wonder if the Association just wanted to get rid of Jones. Every day he saddles his horse and goes ridin' in the hills, but he ain't found out anything."

"Where does he ride?" asked Lane.

"Oh, I don't pay much attention to him."

THEY went into the house. Mary was on a couch, reading an old magazine, but started to leave when they came in. She didn't like the Oreana attorney.

"Don't go," said Lane. "You're always running away."

"She wanted to go to town today," offered Idaho. "But I told her we'd get anything she wants."

"Sure we will," said Lane.

"Does that mean that I'm a prisoner here?" asked Mary indignantly.

"Have it that way, if you want to," replied Idaho. "This deal is almost settled, and we're not takin' any chances on you."

"But what harm would there be in my going to town?" she asked.

"You can go when we tell you to go," declared Idaho, "and then we don't care where you go, just so you go a long ways from here. You'll be paid a-plenty, and all you'll have to do is forget you ever seen the place. I reckon Loring told you that."

Mary turned her attention to the magazine, glad to drop the subject. In a few minutes Lane and Idaho went outside and Mary stared out of the window. She had been virtually a prisoner since she arrived at the Lazy A. Hop served her meals to her in the living room, keeping her away from the dining room and the men.

She had had no chance to talk with Cultus. Idaho Breen had treated her respectfully enough, but she did want a few words with Cultus. But Idaho took no chances, and stayed close to the ranch, while Miles Lane handled the legal end of the inheritance.

She still did not know what they wanted. She had been told nothing, except that she was Mary Ault, the new owner of the Lazy A. She had been given the room formerly occupied by Jud Ault, which had been scrupulously cleaned by Hop. As far as physical comfort was concerned, she was all right.

It was different with Cultus. The Lazy A had furnished him with a horse and saddle, and Breen had told him to do as he pleased. Cultus realized that Mary was more or less of a prisoner, but there was nothing he could do. He also knew that Breen was little interested in the stolen cattle, except that he was not averse to making trouble for the Star X.

That Idaho Breen and Miles Lane intended to loot the Lazy A was easy to see. Cultus could prove that Mary Smith was not Mary Ault, but it would be difficult to prove that there was no Mary Ault. It would only brand Mary Smith as an impostor, and him as her confederate.

Cultus surmised that Breen and Lane intended merely to use the girl to get the ranch cheap. The letters proved that the girl who was shot in San Francisco was Janice Lee, not Mary Ault. Cultus had soon decided that the three Lazy A punchers were not in the plot. They fully believed that "Mary Ault" was genuine. There was no reason for anyone to think otherwise.

On the same day that Lane brought the letter from Dude Wheeler, Cultus

rode in at the tumbledown Cross Arrow, and met Badger and Shif'less Hill. The old man was sitting on his little porch, clad in a sleeveless undershirt, faded overalls, his bare feet on the porch rail while he slumped back in a rickety chair, smoking his pipe.

He unbent enough to remove his pipe from his mouth and grunt a welcome. Cultus dismounted, tied his horse, and sat down on the steps. As he rolled a cigarette, Shif'less came out, stooping a little, as he stepped through the doorway.

"Howdy," Shif'less said pleasantly. "I didn't know we had company. You're Jones, ain't you?"

"Yeah, I'm Jones." Cultus got up and shook hands with Shif'less.

"You're with the Lazy A, ain't you?"

"I'm over there." Cultus smiled.

"Damned outfit!" snorted the old man. Shif'less smiled.

"Don't like 'em, eh?" queried Cultus.

"No! Why should I like 'em?"

"No reason, I suppose." Cultus shrugged. "Seems like a good outfit. What's wrong with 'em?"

"I reckon it's all right since Jud Ault died," said Shif'less, before the old man could speak. "This girl can't be blamed for what Jud Ault done."

"She's a fine girl," said Cultus. "How's things with you folks?"

"We can't kick," said Shif'less.

"As long as the other outfits raise plenty of calves we're doin' well," said the old man. "At least that's what they say about us." Shif'less tried to stop him, but the old man shook his head violently. "What's the difference? They all say it."

SHIF'LESS smiled grimly at Cultus. "It just happens," he said slowly, "that Mr. Jones is an Association detective, sent here to try and find out who is stealin' Lazy A cattle."

The old man looked at Cultus, his eyes blazing. Cultus remarked how much he did look like a gray old badger, angry over something.

"So that's what you are, eh?" he snarled. "Lookin' over the Cross Arrow, are you? Well, go ahead!"

Cultus looked at Shif'less, ignoring the old man. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"Miles Lane, the lawyer."

Cultus nodded. He had suspected this. He wondered if all the outfits in the Oreana country didn't know what he was doing.

"You a pretty good friend of Lane?" he asked.

Shif'less hesitated. "Well, I've known him quite a long time, Jones. He didn't lie about you, did he?"

Cultus shook his head. "No, he told the truth—as far as he knew it."

"As far as he knew it?"

"Even a lawyer don't know it all."

"Well, what in hell are you doin' here at my ranch?" rasped the old man.

"Tryin' to be friendly."

"And then see what you can find out, eh?"

"If you don't steal cattle, you've got nothin' to fear," said Cultus.

"Well, that's nice of you."

Shif'less studied the tall, homely cowboy. There was a world of power in that lean body. He sat, humped over on the steps, and his cotton shirt, drawn tight, showed the ripple of his back and shoulder muscles. His wide, lean hands, with the long fingers, the broad bony wrists, bespoke viselike power.

"I didn't come over here, because of what I've heard," said Cultus, "because I hardly ever believe what I hear. I'm not denyin' I was sent here by the Association, but it was because Jud Ault wanted me to come."

"But he's been dead quite a while, Jones."

"It took quite a while to locate me, and they didn't know he was dead."

"Now, what in hell did that old crook want of a detective?" demanded Badger Hill.

"I don't know," confessed Cultus. "He didn't know either. But he thought things wasn't just right."

"You bet they wasn't right!" said Shif'less hotly. "Jud Ault turned his daughter out of his house, because she married a man he didn't like. And after the man left her without any support, the old man wouldn't help her!"

"She's a pretty nice sort of a girl, I hear," said Cultus.

XI

CULTUS was looking at Shif'less Hill, as he spoke. He saw the jaw of the big, indolent-looking cowboy shut tightly, and his wistful blue eyes stared out across the hills.

"Yeah, Faith's—nice," said Shif'less slowly.

The old man glanced at Shif'less, then at Cultus, and Cultus saw an expression of amusement in the old fellow's eyes.

"They say her husband is still supportin' her," said Cultus.

Shif'less nodded, but did not speak.

"Has he been here since he left his wife?"

"No."

"Yes," said the old man quickly. "I saw him. You don't need to argue with me, Shif'less." Shif'less had opened his mouth to speak. "I saw Jack Keene in Oreana City, talkin' to Miles Lane, one night. Shif'less says I was mistaken, but I know what I see."

"How long ago was this?"

"A year ago last June," said Shif'less. "It was about the fifteenth of the month. We've argued about it enough, that I remember the date."

They talked for a while longer, but rustling was not mentioned again. Old Badger Hill shook hands with Cultus when he left, and asked him to visit him again.

Cultus rode back to Oreana City, and found the sheriff talking to Mrs. Keene in front of his office. The sheriff introduced them. The little boy accepted Cultus at once, when Cultus smiled at him as he took the young mother's packages, and the three of them walked to Mrs. Keene's home.

Mrs. Keene asked Cultus about Mary Ault. Cultus confessed that he could tell her little. As he carried the packages through the living room to the kitchen he glanced at a photograph on the center table.

"That is little Jackie's father," said Mrs. Keene.

Cultus nodded thoughtfully as he looked at the unmistakable features—Loring, the San Francisco lawyer who had been killed in the cafe gun battle, the man Cultus had knocked into the muddy street.

Cultus came back from the kitchen and went toward the front door. Mrs. Keene held out her hand.

"It was kind of you to carry the packages for me," she said.

He shook hands gravely with her and with the little boy, and went down to the main street, his sombrero pulled down over his eyes. He had found out more than he had expected.

Jack Keene was the man who had sent a woman to pose as the niece of Jud Ault, and it was evident that Keene, or Loring, as he was known in San Francisco, was in the plot to loot the Lazy A. But Keene was dead, and Cultus did not think that either Lane or Breen knew that. Janice Lee was probably dead or in a hospital, and likely didn't know enough about the plot ever to let Lane and Breen know what happened.

As Cultus sauntered up the crooked street Miles Lane rode in and took his horse to the livery stable. When Lane went to his office, Cultus crossed the street and followed him in.

Lane greeted him pleasantly and they sat down. Lane remarked that he had just returned from the Lazy A.

"I was just talkin' to Mrs. Keene," said Cultus.

"A nice girl," said Lane briskly. "Too bad she lost the Lazy A. Possibly Jud Ault was too severe, but he hated Jack Keene, and— Oh, well, it was his business, I suppose. What have you found out in regard to the missing cattle?"

"Not much. What do you know about the Cross Arrow?"

"Less than nothing—except hearsay. The Hills haven't a good reputation."

"And the Star X?"

"You've heard about the feud?"

"Sure. They staged a battle in the street here the night I arrived. Breen talks about 'em killin' Lazy A stock, but I can't quite swallow it, Lane. The Star X is as big as the Lazy A, and they don't need to kill Lazy A cattle."

Lane looked up quickly.

"Have you been at the Star X?"

"I was out there yesterday and had a talk with the Wheelers."

"And they knew you were from the Lazy A?"

"They knew I was from the Association," corrected Cultus.

Lane smiled crookedly. "That won't help you any, Jones."

"Maybe not." Cultus smiled. "You see, I wasn't the one that told 'em."

"Who do you suppose—"

"They say you did, Lane."

"Why, that's preposterous, Jones!"

"And old man Hill—"

"Did he say I told him?"

"Shif'less did."

Lane colored. "I don't know why they would say such a thing, Jones."

"Unless you're tryin' to get me killed off," Cultus said softly.

"Why, the idea is ridiculous, Jones! I haven't any interest in you except that I was Ault's attorney for years, and naturally I'm interested in anything affecting the Lazy A Ranch. Idaho Breen wants you to clean up this rustling. Why, I'd be the last person on earth to seek to injure you, Jones."

"Well, that's fine," drawled Cultus, and sauntered out.

Dude Wheeler, just going into the post office, waved to Cultus who walked up and met him.

"I want to ask you somethin', Jones," said Dude, a bashful grin on his face. "You know I met Miss Ault the night she came in. She's sure a nice girl."

Cultus grinned widely.

Dude sighed. "It's thisaway, Jones. I ain't seen her since that night, and I can't go out to the Lazy A. I wrote her a letter and posted it here this mornin'. I just found out that Miles Lane took the Lazy A mail out to the ranch today. And Miles Lane,"—Dude hesitated—"he was all dressed up to go out there. I don't trust him, and I'm wonderin'—"

"If he delivered the letter, eh?"

"You might put it thataway, Jones. I know him pretty well."

Cultus grinned. "What can *I* do for you?"

"Will you hand her a note from me?"

"Yeah. I ain't seen her to speak to for a long time, but if it's possible, I'll see that she gets it."

When Cultus rode back to the Lazy A he carried the note to Mary. It was almost supper time, and the boys were all at the ranch. Cultus went to the long wash-bench just outside the kitchen door, and began washing, while Hop stood in the kitchen door, dangling a ladle in his hand.

"Hop, do you happen to know a Chinaboy in Frisco, whose name is Wang Lee?" asked Cultus.

Old Hop smiled widely. "Yessa—my clousin. He lun chop-suey lestlant."

Cultus grinned and nodded. "Wang Lee good friend of mine."

This was not true, because Cultus did not know Wang Lee. He only knew of a popular chop suey restaurant of that name. But old Hop beamed.

"Wang Lee velly lich—my clousin."

Cultus mopped his face with a towel, as he moved in closer to the Chinese. "Wong Lee my friend, Hop. You must be my friend, too. You *sabe?*"

"Yessa."

"Good." Cultus took the envelope from his pocket, caught it in a fold of the towel and handed it to Hop. "That is for Miss Ault, Hop. Nobody must see."

The old Celestial slipped the envelope inside his shirt and turned away without a word. Mary wrote a reply to Cultus, which was given to him by old Hop, after supper. She wrote:

Am virtually a prisoner. Tell Mr. Wheeler I will see him as soon as possible. Would like to talk with you, but Breen says I am to talk with no one. If Hop will carry notes, it will be some help to us. They are treating me all right.

That she was a prisoner was no news to Cultus, and he knew Dude Wheeler was right in suspecting that Miles Lane had not delivered the letter to Mary.

UNDER the law, it would require nearly a year to probate the will of Jud Ault, advertise for creditors, and follow out all the legal phases of the instrument, but Cultus knew that, while hardly ethical, it would be legal for an heir to sell his or her interest to anyone who was willing to take a chance on the legality of the will in question.

If Breen and Miles Lane intended doing such a thing, there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Mary would be obliged to sign the name of Mary Ault to a bill of sale to the Lazy A. Of course, he could notify the authorities of fraud, possibly defeat the purpose of Breen and Lane, but that would only throw the will into courts indefinitely, or until it might be proved that no Mary Ault existed.

All Cultus could do was wait until something happened that would give him a chance to puzzle out a solution of the case. In the meantime he decided to keep working on the cattle stealing end.

He had a talk with Idaho Breen about the cattle that night, but the Lazy A foreman did not seem interested. Cultus tried to lead Breen into a discussion of Faith Ault's husband, Jack Keene, but Idaho side-stepped. Cultus dropped it and went to bed, deciding to visit Welcome Creek the next day. . . .

Earlier that afternoon Shif'less Hill had ridden to Oreana City, and gone to the depot. He had sent a rifle to a San Francisco gunmaker for some repairs, and it was back. He paid the express charges and took the package outside, where he sat down on the edge of the platform and unwrapped the rifle. It had been encased in a light wooden box and packed tightly with newspapers.

Shif'less tried the action, found it functioning perfectly. He was putting the papers back in the box when his eyes got a glimpse of a pictured face on one of the wrinkled newspapers. Quickly he spread it out.

The unmistakable features of Jack Keene stared up at him, along with the face of a pretty girl, beneath whose picture was the name "Janice Lee." But the name beneath Keene's picture was "J. Loring." Connecting the pen and ink scroll which joined the two portraits, was an artist's conception of the gun battle between two men, and behind one of them was a girl in a traveling suit.

The story told of a gun battle in a San Francisco café, in which J. Loring, an attorney, and "Speed" Evans, alleged gangster and dope peddler, had killed each other. Janice Lee had died twelve hours later, without regaining consciousness. Loring, the story said, was little known outside the tenderloin.

Shif'less read it though twice, the rifle lying across his knees. There was no question in his mind about this being a picture of Jack Keene. He noted the date of the paper, carefully tore out the article and put it in his pocket.

Picking up the rifle, he walked around the depot, to his horse. He rode back up the street to Miles Lane's office. He found Lane there.

"What's on your mind, Shif'less?" asked Lane.

Shif'less placed his rifle on the desk and drew out the clipping. The attorney took the clipping and stared at the picture of Jack Keene. And as he read the story he seemed to sway slightly and his eyes blinked painfully.

XII

LANE lifted a hand and wiped the tears from his eyes—not tears of grief or remorse, but tears like those a man might get after his eyes had stared into a bright light. For a long time he did not speak.

"What do you know about that?" asked Shif'less softly.

"Jack Keene dead!" Lane hoarsely breathed.

"Well, he'd prob'ly end up thataway," said Shif'less.

Lane looked at Shif'less blankly. "What did you say?"

"I said he'd prob'ly end-up thataway."

Lane looked at the clipping again. Shif'less had left the date-line at the top of the page. Lane glanced quickly at a calendar on the wall.

"We've got to keep Faith from finding it out, Miles," said Shif'less softly.

"Faith? Oh, yes. Yes, we must keep it quiet, Shif'less. You won't tell anyone, will you? I can trust you, can't I?"

"Well, I'd be the last to tell *her*," drawled Shif'less.

Lane almost pawed for Shif'less' hand. "We'll keep it dark, eh? Don't let anybody know. If one person finds it out, they'll all know it."

"I won't tell." Shif'less shook his head. "Miles, I wonder if that was Jack's girl." Shif'less looked wistfully out through the window. "Faith still thinks he's all right."

"You never can figure a woman, Shif'less."

"Jack Keene took a different name and left his wife—"

"I know, Shif'less. You love Faith Keene. Maybe she thinks a lot of you. I'll help you."

"I don't need no help, Miles. She said the other day she couldn't never marry anybody as long as Jack was alive. Now, Jack's dead—and we can't tell her."

"No, don't tell her!" Lane grasped his arm. "Don't, Shif'less. She'd think you —you were trying to hurry things! Don't you see?"

"Yeah, I see." Shif'less nodded. "Well, I'm headin' home, Miles. Hang onto that piece of paper, won't you?"

"Oh, I'll keep it safe, Shif'less. Good night."

As Shif'less rode out of town, Miles Lane locked his front door and flopped in his office chair, trying to gather his scattered senses. He studied the clipping again. Janice Lee! That was the name on the note of identification!

The girl out at the Lazy A was not Janice Lee! Then who was she? Did this Association detective, Jones, have anything to do with it? Where had this girl come from, and where had she got the identification papers?

Jack Keene, alias J. Loring, who had written the note was dead. Lane wondered if the girl at the Lazy A had stolen the papers at the time of the gun battle. And if she had, who and what was behind her masquerade?

Lane drew a big bottle from a desk drawer and took a drink. He left the bottle uncorked, and every few minutes he would lower the contents perceptibly. He decided to go to the Lazy A and show the clipping to Idaho Breen, but the quart bottle was empty when he got his horse at the livery stable—and Lane was very drunk. In fact, he was so muddled that he took the wrong road in the dark, and when he sobered enough to realize anything he was not on any road, had no sense of direction—and nothing to drink. So he just rode on and on, wondering if the moon would ever come up and show him some familiar landscape.

After a while he saw the silhouette of an old building and recognized the deserted stamp-mill and buildings of the abandoned Suicide Mine. Jim Scott, the owner, had sunk every cent he owned in it, failed to make it pay, and hung himself in the shafthouse. Others had tried in vain to make it pay, and it was finally abandoned.

The night was nearly over, but Lane was not going to take any chances on getting lost. As long as he had the buildings of the old mine as a landmark, it would not be difficult by daylight to cut across the hills to the Lazy A.

He rode up closer to the old shafthouse, intending to dismount. A cold breeze was sweeping across the hills, and Miles Lane, not dressed too warmly, needed shelter.

SUDDENLY he saw the dull gleam of a light shining through a crack in the old building, and also realized that he had ridden in beside a saddled horse. He was still a little dazed, but instinct told him that something was not right.

He rode slowly back down the trail, turned his horse into the shelter of a mesquite clump in a dry wash, and dismounted. Curiosity prompted him to climb back up the trail again, but he circled to the opposite side of the building, careful to make no unnecessary noise.

He came in against the wall of the building, and worked his way around to where a broken board gave him a fairly good view of the interior. The machinery had all been moved away, but there still remained the old framework of the hoist parts of the old tracks, and the huge timbers where the hoisting engine had stood.

An old lantern hung from a nail, and in its faint illumination Lane could see the huge bulk of a man, his shadow dancing grotesquely on the walls, as he skinned out the carcass of a steer which was suspended from the hoist-frame.

Another whole beef, all dressed, hung nearby. Lane recognized the man now—Shif'less Hill! He was working swiftly, his skinning knife flashing in the yellow light. The lantern light also flashed on the cartridge-heads in his belt, and against the wall near him stood a Winchester rifle.

Lane, unarmed, suddenly realized that it might not be healthy for him in case Shif'less suspected his presence. As though fascinated he leaned against the building and watched the big cowboy strip off the hide.

Daylight was creeping over the hills when Shif'less finished skinning the animal, and threw the hide down the shaft. Lane grinned. He had plenty of evidence to send Shif'less Hill over the road for a long time—in case he needed to use it.

He shoved away from the wall and crept away in the direction of his horse.

The Lazy A cowboys were a snoring trio when Cultus left the bunkhouse and went to the stable, where he saddled his horse. It was still dark, and Hop would not have breakfast ready for another hour, at least, so Cultus decided to postpone his morning meal until he reached Welcome Creek.

He had never been to Welcome Creek, but he knew it was not over fifteen miles east of the Lazy A, and that by traveling past where Idaho Breen had found the Lazy A hides in the prospect hole, he could strike the wagon road. It led from Oreana City to the Welcome Creek mines.

Breen had given Cultus a tall roan gelding for his use. The mount had plenty of speed, and the chill of early morning gave it plenty of ambition to go ahead. The going was fairly good, and Cultus let the roan pick its own speed.

Cultus had never seen the old Suicide Mine, but had heard the boys speak about it. He rode around the side of a hill and came in view of the old buildings, shortly after daylight. His horse made little noise in the sandy soil, and he was within a hundred yards of the old shaft-house when he saw Miles Lane sneaking away from the building. Cultus' horse was partly masked by the brush, so Cultus quickly dismounted. He watched the lawyer sneak down a dry wash, mount his horse behind a mesquite clump and ride swiftly away toward the Lazy A.

"That's kind of queer," thought Cultus. "Now just what would a lawyer be doin' there at this time in the mornin'?"

Cultus watched Lane ride across a ridge and disappear, before moving on down to the shaft-house. He walked boldly to the sagging old door, stepped inside—and jerked to a standstill when he found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle in the hands of Shif'less Hill.

It was still half dark in the old building. Shifting his eyes from the menacing gun muzzle, Cultus could see the two

beefs hanging.

"Well, what about it?" asked Shif'less in a flat voice.

A smile chased across Cultus' lips and he shook his head.

"I reckon that's up to you, Shif'less."

"Yeah? How'd you guess I'd be here?"

"I didn't," said Cultus.

"No? Kind of early in the mornin', ain't it?"

Cultus nodded. "Yeah. I was on my way to Welcome Creek."

"And just stopped to look, eh?"

"Well, no-o-o. I didn't have no idea of stoppin' here until I saw our friend the Oreana City lawyer sneak away from outside there, grab his horse and fog for the Lazy A."

"Miles Lane?"

"That's the feller."

Cultus could see that the big cowboy was puzzled.

"What was Miles Lane doin' here?" he demanded.

"Search me. Put down the gun, Shif'less."

"I suppose I might as well, Jones. I'm caught with the goods. If Lane is headed for the Lazy A, he'll bring back the whole gang."

CULTUS looked at the beef.

"Threw the hides in the old shaft?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Intendin' to pack the meat to Welcome Creek tonight, eh?"

The big cowboy nodded gloomily. "I don't know how you guessed it, but you're right."

"That wasn't hard to guess. You killed those animals that wore all them Lazy A hides—"

"That Breen found," finished Shif'less. "Yeah, I did."

"Welcome Creek was the only market, I figured. Breen had an idea the Star X was killin' off his stock, but the Star X don't need to kill beef."

"I've been killin' Lazy A beef for over a year," said Shif'less. "I couldn't handle much at a time. It's quite a job for one man. Dad wouldn't help me. He said I was a damn' fool, and I sure was. Now what are you goin' to do about it?"

"How deep is this shaft?"

"Two hundred feet. There's big stopes, of course."

"All right. How could the Lazy A find those hides? Is there any way to get down there?"

"Not unless they go down on a rope."

"Where would they ever find a two-hundred-foot rope?" said Cultus. "Lane thinks you don't know he saw you, so we'll just heave them two beefs down the shaft, which will destroy all the evidence. What little blood is scattered around won't convict anybody. Let's get busy."

"What's your game?" queried Shif'less.

"Helpin' out a damn' fool. . . ."

The Lazy A was at breakfast when Miles Lane rode in. Breen left the table and met him at the front door.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Breen. "You look pretty tough, Miles."

The lawyer took hold of Breen's sleeve and drew him off the porch and around the corner.

"Is Jones and the girl still here?" he asked.

"The girl is. Jones has gone to Welcome Creek. What's the matter?"

Lane drew out the newspaper clipping and showed it to Breen.

"There's what's the matter, Idaho. Jack Keene is dead. Look at the dateline on that paper. The name of that girl whose picture you see is Janice Lee, and she's dead, too."

Idaho lifted his eyes from the paper, staring blankly at the lawyer.

"What does it mean?" he whispered.

"What does it mean? It means that the girl who is here is not Janice Lee. She is somebody else! She is not the girl Jack Keene sent. We've been double-crossed, Idaho!"

"You think—"

"I know! What's behind it, I don't know. But this girl came on the same train with Jones, the detective. Idaho,

we've got to work fast. They don't know that I know this, so that helps."

"Does anybody else know it, Miles?"

"Shif'less Hill. He gave me the clipping."

"Then we've got to stop him from meetin' Jones. I'll bet Jones knows Keene is dead, and he figures we don't. If he knows that we know—"

"I've got the goods on Shif'less Hill!" exclaimed Lane, and told of seeing Shif'less butchering cattle in the old shaft-house of the Suicide Mine.

"We'll get him!" snorted Breen. "Here's what we'll do. You head for town and get the papers. I'll send the boys over to investigate this butcherin', and we'll make this female here sign all the papers while they're gone. Jones is headin' for Welcome Creek, and when he comes back, we'll settle with him, too!"

"And turn this girl loose to tell all she knows?" demanded Lane.

"What you don't know won't hurt you," growled Idaho. "Get your bronc and go after them papers!"

XIII

GETTING his horse, Lane rode back toward Oreana City. In the dining room the cowboys were rolling their after-breakfast cigarettes, when Breen called them outside.

"You fellers saddle up and go to the old Suicide Mine," he ordered. "Lane just brought word that somebody has been doin' a job of butcherin' down there in the old shaft-house, and we've got a hunch that Shif'less Hill is the one who has been doin' it. If you find Hill around there, watch him."

"Supposin' we go and *get* him, Idaho?"

"Better be sure, first," said Idaho grimly. "Shif'less will fight. He threw the hides in the old shaft, and the devil himself couldn't get down there to find 'em; so we've got to take a chance that he killed Lazy A cattle. You'll find the beef in the shaft-house."

The cowboys hurried after their horses. They rode away with their rifles, and Idaho went back to the house, where he found Mary in the living room.

"I'm goin' to talk turkey to you," he told her. "In an hour or so, Miles Lane will be out here with the papers for you to sign—and you better sign 'em without any argument, *sabe?*"

"What papers, Mr. Breen?" Mary was frightened at his tone.

"The bill of sale to the Lazy A," growled Breen. "He'll have it all made out, and all you'll have to do is to sign. You turn the whole works over to me."

"I give you a bill of sale to the Lazy A Ranch?"

"You sure do, young lady. As soon as that's done I'll ship you back where you came from." Breen glared at Mary, who stood beside the center table, looking at him. "You and your detective friend thought you was damn smart, didn't you? I know you're not the girl who was supposed to come here." He stalked toward her, a grin on his hard face. "You think you're goin' to get a thousand dollars for signin' them papers. Ha! You poor little fool! Set down! Scared, eh? You need to be. Do you think I'm goin' to let you beat me out of a million dollars! Oh, you don't need to look toward the window. Your pard won't be back for a while, and when he does come back, I'll be here to welcome him, and *you* won't be here!"

Mary dropped into a chair beside the table. She was deadly afraid of Breen. She had seen the cowboys ride away, and Hop was in the kitchen, but she could expect no help from him, anyway.

"Where are you going to send me?" she asked helplessly.

Breen laughed shortly. "*Quien sabe?* Who knows where we'll send you. Why, you poor little fool, where *can* we send you—where you can't talk? And we can't let you talk!"

"If I promise not to—"

"Promise! What good's a promise? Set still! You act sensible and sign those papers—Mary Ault!" Breen laughed

harshly. "Mary Ault! And you tried to fool me."

IN THE meantime Cultus and Shif'less had ridden away from the old mine, heading toward the Cross Arrow. Shif'less was still a little mystified as to why Cultus had helped him destroy the evidence. They had left nothing for the Lazy A to find, unless they searched the crumbling old shaft.

Shif'less nodded gloomily. "I still don't *sabe* what Lane was doin' there at that time in the mornin', Jones."

"I don't know, either. Shif'less, I've heard that you kinda think a lot of Faith Keene."

Shif'less turned in his saddle.

"Why don't yuh marry her, cowboy?"

"Plenty of reasons, I reckon. In the first place, I don't know if she'd marry me if she could, and in the second place she's still got a husband."

"Well," said Cultus, "you can easy find out the first part of it, and just between me and you, her husband is dead."

Shif'less stared. "How do you know?"

"I happened to be there when he was killed. I didn't know he was Jack Keene at the time, but I seen Keene's picture later, and it was the face of the feller who was killed—a cheap lawyer in Frisco they called Loring."

Shif'less nodded. "There was two men killed, and a woman. Her name was Janice Lee." Impulsively Shif'less told him about finding the newspaper. "I took it to Lane," he said. "Lane was Keene's friend, and I thought—"

"You took it to him last night?" Cultus reined in his horse.

"Yeah."

"Good gosh!" exploded Cultus. "And Lane has gone to meet Idaho Breen. Listen, Shif'less, you hurry to town. If Breen or Lane show up there with that girl, Mary Ault, stop 'em. I can't tell you why right now. Just stop 'em, and bring 'em out to the Lazy A as fast as you can!"

Cultus whirled his horse, drew his hat down over his eyes, and sent the roan at a gallop toward the Lazy A. Because of that newspaper clipping Lane and Breen knew that Mary Smith was an impostor! And Breen would stop at nothing now to get the Lazy A!

As Cultus rode at headlong speed, Miles Lane was riding almost as swiftly back to the Lazy A with the papers for Mary to sign. He had prepared them carefully, and all they needed was the signature of Mary Ault, and his own, as notary public. He had made the imprint of his seal before he left the office.

Her signature would make Idaho Jim Breen owner of the Lazy A, with Miles Lane as a full partner. Even the partnership papers were all prepared.

When he rode his lathered horse up to the ranchhouse and went in, Mary was sitting beside the table, her face dead white. On a chair against the wall sat Idaho Breen. He had been drinking from a bottle, and was alert.

Lane nodded and spread the papers on the table. "Get the pen and ink, Idaho," he ordered.

When Breen placed the pen and ink on the table, Lane dipped the pen in ink and handed it to Mary, placing his finger on the ruled line.

"Put your name right there," he commanded. "Just write Mary Ault."

"But that isn't my name," Mary said trembling.

"Nobody knows that better than we do," sneered Breen. "Write it, and we'll take a chance. You wasn't asked to come here, you know."

"Suppose I refuse to sign," Mary looked at him defiantly. "You can't make me."

"Huh! Everybody knows you're the owner of the Lazy A, so if you refuse to sign, we'll just fake your signature."

"And I'll swear it isn't mine—and prove it!"

Breen's jaw tightened. "You won't prove anything. If you've got a lick of sense, you'll sign that paper right now!"

Mary took the pen and signed the name of Mary Ault. There was nothing else for her to do. Breen laughed and

reached for the bottle on the floor.

"Better go easy on that stuff," advised Lane. "We're not out of the woods yet."

Breen took a big drink and ordered Mary:

"Get dressed for travelin'. Pack your suitcase. We're pullin' out. *Poco tiempo!* You stay here with her, Lane, while I hitch up a team to the buggy."

Mary went to her room and put a few things in the suitcase, but did not bother to pack the trunk. She had not worn any of Janice Lee's clothes, for she had not been out of the house since her arrival.

She was glad to leave the Lazy A, but was in deadly fear that these two men were not through with her yet. She had been living in sort of a daze ever since that night at the restaurant in San Francisco.

She carried the suitcase in to the living room and sat down in an old rocking-chair. Lane was helping himself to Breen's bottle, and his hand trembled as he looked at Mary. He had not fully recovered from last night's debauch.

Outside, Breen was hitching up a pair of vicious-looking grays, a half-broken team. He was obliged to tie them to the corral fence and drag the buggy ar und to them. As soon as they were hitched he went to the house and flung open the front door.

"You pull out ahead of us, Miles," he growled. "Hit the grit, hombre, because we'll need an open road."

Lane placed the bottle on the table and walked out, mounted his horse and rode swiftly away.

"What about my trunk?" asked Mary.

Breen turned from watching Lane gallop out of sight.

"You don't need to worry about that."

Mary shivered as Breen emptied the bottle down his throat and threw the bottle viciously aside. He picked up her suitcase and nodded toward the door.

"Get goin'," he growled.

Mary preceded him from the house and they went down to the corral, where the gray team humped angrily under the feel of the harness. Breen threw her suitcase in the back of the buggy and motioned her to get in. As she sat down and looked at him, she saw that he had turned and was staring past the end of the stable. Then he began running toward the front of the stable, which was near the main gate.

HE WAS within twenty yards of the gate when Cultus came in sight, swinging his horse toward the gate. Mary saw Breen jerk to a stop, throwing up his right hand, which held a six-shooter. She tried to cry out to Cultus, who was partly masked from Breen by the huge gate post, but before she could utter any sound Cultus had turned to ride through the gate, and Breen fired.

Cultus jerked sideward from the shock of the heavy bullet, and his tall roan whirled quickly, throwing Cultus heavily just inside the enclosure. The horse trotted a few yards away, and stopped against the fence, looking back at its rider.

Breen ran up to Cultus and quickly turned him over. Evidently satisfied that Cultus was out of the game for good, he ran back to the buggy and untied the horses, which were still jerking nervously from the sound of the revolver shot.

He climbed in beside Mary, whirled the team around and went out through the gate at racing speed. The lurch of the buggy almost threw Mary out, and she did not get a look at Cultus as they raced past. Breen did not try to check the horses. His jaw was set tightly, and Mary could see that his lips were grim and white. He did not speak nor look at her.

Mary had been over the road only once, but she knew it was even more dangerous than the one over which she had ridden in the runaway the night she had come to Oreana City. About a mile below the Lazy A the road looped around over some dizzy grades above a deep canyon, and she remembered that Cultus had remarked it was a place where

a driver was allowed only one mistake.

She was wondering anxiously why Breen did not make any attempt to check the running team. He was crouched on the edge of the seat, his feet drawn well under him, his eyes shut to mere slits, as the buggy lurched and bounded over the uneven road. They whirled down through a swale, where the mesquite ripped along the wheels and sides of the buggy like the sound of tearing silk.

A rock sent them skidding wildly, but the vehicle did not upset. It threw Mary to her knees, but Breen, ripping out an oath, yanked her back in the seat, his elbow striking her in the mouth as he recovered his balance.

She threw up both hands to protect her face, and the next instant Breen had flung himself clear of the buggy. Mary spun around but he was blotted out in a swirl of dust.

XIV

JERKING around in the seat, Mary saw just ahead of her the beginning of the grades around the deep canyon. To attempt a jump from the buggy would mean that she would have to choose between falling into the canyon or being smashed against the rocky side of the grade.

The horses were running at top speed, low to the ground, the lines whipping through the air, the buggy and its occupant bounding along behind them. Mary was so dazed, so frightened that all she could do was hang on.

They took the first turn on two wheels, straightened perilously near the outer edge, and headed for the next curve. It was a sharp turn to the right, and on the left was an old washout, filled with brush.

The inside wheels smashed against the wall. Dust and gravel, a cataclysm of overturned buggy, flying hoofs, the scream of a horse, and the outfit hurtled over the edge, dropping straight down for fifty feet, where it struck a broken ledge, seemed to hang for a moment, then went crashing and rolling into the bottom of the gorge a hundred feet below. . . .

Cultus had seen Idaho Breen just before the shot was fired, and before the shock of the bullet had knocked him unconscious he knew that Breen had shot him. He was shocked back to consciousness by a deluge of cold water, and opened his eyes to see Hop, the Chinese cook, standing over him, bucket in hand.

"You hu't pletty damn' bad?" queried the Chinese anxiously.

Cultus struggled up, clamping his jaws to hold back an exclamation of pain. It seemed as if a red-hot iron was searing deeply in his left shoulder. He panted, while cold perspiration dripped from his face.

But his mind cleared rapidly, and the Chinese helped him to his feet, trying to think why Breen had shot him. He felt for his gun and found it still in the holster.

"Why did he shoot me?" he asked hoarsely.

The Chinese shook his head. "Do' know. I not see. I hea'."

Cultus looked around, vaguely, as though trying to see Breen.

"He go 'way," said Hop. "He take li'l missie 'way in buggy. Go like hell. Team lun 'way. Yo' *sabe?*"

"Team run away?"

"Plitty bad team. Not bloke yet."

Cultus wiped the back of a hand across his eyes. "Hop, was Miles Lane here today?"

"Yessa. He lide 'way jus' befo' you come. Lide damn' fast."

"A runaway team—and those grades!" muttered Cultus. "Hop, I've been a fool."

He went gropingly to his horse, climbed into the saddle, forgetting to pick up his sombrero, and spurred the animal savagely through the gate and down the road toward Oreana City. His shoulder was bleeding and he was racked with pain, but he clamped his teeth and drove the roan at racing speed, fearing

that nothing could save Mary now.

The tall roan slowed down the moment they struck the grade, and Cultus, half blinded by pain and weakness, swayed in the saddle, as he peered over the edge of the grade. Only a miracle could have prevented the running team from meeting disaster.

The first curve showed nothing, except that wheels had torn deeply into the outer edge. But at the next turn he found the left front wheel of the buggy, which had been torn off from the impact against the rocky wall. Something had gone off the edge!

Cultus dismounted and leaned against his horse, trying to overcome the dizziness which caused his knees to sag. He tried to walk but staggered like a drunken man and fell to his knees.

"Keep a-goin', you quitter!" he muttered bitterly.

His eyes focused sharply on a spot in the brush on the left side of the road and he lurched to his feet, staggered off the road and tore his way into the brush, where Mary was half lying, half sitting, her eyes open, a smear of blood across her face. When the buggy had struck the rocky wall it had thrown her into the brush.

CULTUS went to his knees beside her, trying to disentangle her from the brush, while she looked at him dazedly. Summoning all of his strength he lifted her and carried her back to the road, where he went to his knees again.

"Mary Smith," he said brokenly. "Mary Smith!"

She did not seem badly hurt, but she did not know him.

"I—I wanted to answer your note," she told him. "But they watched me too closely. I wanted to see you again."

She began crying softly, and Cultus pawed clumsily at her hair, trying to soothe her.

"Yeah, I know," he whispered. He knew she thought she was talking to Dude Wheeler.

"Where's Idaho Breen?" he asked.

Mary stared at him. The question stirred something in her mind.

"He jumped," she said simply.

Cultus nodded. "I thought he did."

Cultus caught his horse. It was difficult for him to get into the saddle with Mary, but he did it. The tall roan went slowly, while Cultus reeled in the saddle, his arms locked around the girl.

It was a nightmare, Cultus thought. Someone was coming down the grade toward him, and he laughed foolishly.

The man rode up, shoving his horse in close, trying to take Mary away from him. He was imploring Cultus to let him take the girl. Cultus wanted to draw his gun on the man, but didn't dare let loose of Mary.

The man's voice seemed familiar, and suddenly it dawned on Cultus that this was Dude Wheeler. He laughed aloud at the queer kinks of a nightmare.

"Let me have her, Jones," begged Dude. "Man, you're hurt!"

This seemed to drive the mists from Cultus' brain. He could see Dude Wheeler plainly now, could feel Dude's sorrel against the roan.

"Aw-ri'." Cultus nodded drunkenly. "She wants you, I—I reckon."

He released his hold on Mary and let Dude take her. He reeled in his saddle and grasped the horn for support.

"Got me pullin' leather." He grimaced painfully.

"Who shot yuh, Jones?"

"Who?" Cultus didn't seem to remember. "Oh, that was a long time ago."

"I met Idaho Breen. He's headin' to town for help, said the team ran away and that Mary was at the bottom of the canyon. But who shot you, Jones?"

"I don't remember. Yeah, I do remember somethin'." He stared at Dude. You say Idaho Breen is headin' for town? Today, Dude?"

"Not ten minutes ago, Jones. But, you've got to get a doctor. We'll get on to town, if you think you can ride."

Cultus rubbed a hand across his eyes. "There's Mary Smith to think about," he mumbled.

"Mary Smith?" said Dude. "Not Mary Ault?"

"Mary Elizabeth Smith. I'm Jones from Oklahoma. We're both liars, Dude. No, she ain't a liar—I lied for both of us. But a feller's got to lie to clean up a crooked game. The Lazy A was bein' looted—by men stealin' from a dead man and a widder. I've got to get to town!"

Dude was staring at him, wonderingly. Mary looked up at Dude, a puzzled expression in her eyes. She brushed her hand wearily across her eyes.

"What was it?" she whispered.

His arm tightened instinctively. "It's all right, Mary. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying," she said. "I—I knew you'd come."

Cultus swayed weakly, rode past Dude who swung around, and they headed for Oreana City. . . .

Miles Lane lost no time in getting back to Oreana City. He had no idea what plans Idaho Breen might have, but Lane was wise enough to get to town, where he could have an alibi. He stabled his horse and headed for his office, just as the three cowboys from the Lazy A rode in. He waited for them at the hitch-rack, and received a scowl from Pie Ide.

"You and your cussed evidence!" snorted Pie. "We couldn't find a thing at the old mine."

"Did you look in the shaft?"

"Two hundred feet down?" Pie hooked his thumbs over his belt and glared at the attorney. "Every time I look at you, Lane, I wonder how much real brains it takes to get admitted to the bar. If you can be an attorney, any danged one of us punchers can be a supreme court judge."

"You can't talk to me like that!" Lane bristled.

Little Mex Leone shoved Pie Ide aside.

"What Pie just said goes double for me," he said. "I'm the smallest one of the bunch, and I'm plumb willin' to hear all the war-talk you can bring up."

LANE walked away while the three cowpunchers guffawed loudly and went toward the Oreana, their spurs rasping belligerently. They found Shif'less Hill in the Oreana Saloon. Omaha Woods called Shif'less aside, and told him of the report Miles Lane had brought to Idaho Breen. Shif'less neither affirmed nor denied the accusation.

"Breen sent us down there to investigate," said Omaha. "But we didn't find a thing. I'm just tellin' you this for yore own benefit, Shif'less—not tryin' to start anything."

"Much obliged, Omaha," drawled Shif'less. "That's sure kind of yuh."

Shif'less left the saloon and went to the store, where he bought a bag of peanuts. He came out, crunching them between his strong teeth, and went to Miles Lane's office. The attorney started at sight of the big cowboy, but relaxed with a forced smile.

"You don't look so well," said Shif'less. "Kinda chalky around the gills."

Lane swallowed heavily and shifted. "I'm all right. What do you mean, Shif'less?"

Shif'less crunched on some peanuts. "You always pretended to be my friend, and so you sneaked out to the old Suicide Mine and tried to put the deadwood on me."

"Why—uh—no,! Shif'less, who told you that? I got lost last night, and —Listen, I—I—"

Lane stopped to swallow. He didn't like the expression in the eyes of the big cowboy.

"You've got the loop around your feet," said Shif'less. You sent the Lazy A gang out to get me, Miles Lane."

"But they didn't find anything. I knew they wouldn't! Listen, Shif'less, that was—"

"You was tryin' to play a joke on me, eh?" Shif'less dusted his hands on the knees of his chaps. "You thought it would be awful funny for me to get hung. You've sure got a sense of humor."

Lane was speechless, but his brain was working swiftly. He was in a pre-

carious position, and he knew it well.

"I run across Jones, the ranger detective," said Shif'less." He knew Jack Keene was dead, so I told him about what I found in the paper, and he went whalin' back toward the Lazy A. He's a queer jigger. He saw you sneak away from the old mine this mornin', Miles."

"He knew about Jack Keene?" chattered Lane.

"Sure did. Said he saw Jack get shot his ownself."

"Then that girl—"

Lane stopped, realizing that he was talking too much. His hand shook as he reached into a desk drawer, getting to his feet to mask the fact he had taken a gun from the desk.

"What about the girl?" asked Shif'less.

"None of your business!" rasped Lane, and he walked to the doorway, his mind in a whirl.

He was afraid of Jones of Oklahoma, who had seen Jack Keene killed. He wanted to see Idaho Breen. If Idaho was bringing that girl from the Lazy A to Oreana City, he should be here by this time, he thought. What could be keeping him? Had Jones reached the Lazy A before Idaho and the girl were ready to leave? Had Jones stopped them?

As he left his office he saw Cleve Sears, the pudgy sheriff, coming up the street. Lane swung down the street and hurried to meet the sheriff. Shif'less sauntered to the office door and saw them meet farther down the street.

"Hyah, Miles," puffed the sheriff. "How are you today?"

"Don't look toward my office," cautioned Lane. "Shif'less Hill is watching us. I saw him butchering cattle at the old Suicide Mine early this morning—in the shaft-house. The boys from the Lazy A went after him, but he had thrown all the evidence into the shaft. There must be a way to recover it, Cleve, so you had better arrest Shif'less at once and put him in jail. But look out for him. He knows I saw him, and he knows I'm telling you about it now."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "Are you sure, Miles?"

"Sure? Why, I saw him. He wouldn't be butchering his own cattle up there in that old building. All we've got to do is to get the evidence out of the shaft."

"And it's two hundred feet deep!" sighed Sears. "All right—I'll arrest him, if you say so, Miles. You can swear out the warrant later."

"That's all right, Cleve. I'll do it."

Lane crossed the street, headed for the livery stable, and Shif'less walked swiftly across to the Oreana Saloon. The sheriff hesitated, for he hated to arrest this big cowboy. He had known Shif'less for years. It was like arresting his brother.

Shif'less had disappeared into the saloon when the sheriff started across the street.

XV

SHIF'LESS HILL, however, did not stop in the saloon. He surmised what Lane had told the sheriff, so he walked straight through the saloon, out the rear entrance and circled around to the livery stable.

The stableman had led out Lane's saddle horse, and was helping Lane to saddle when Lane turned his head and saw Shif'less leaning against the side of a stall. Lane's right hand fumbled at his coat pocket.

"You hadn't ought to do that," warned the big cowboy. "You know I seen you put a gun in that pocket."

Lane reached for the reins.

"You ain't goin' nowhere," said Shif'less quietly. He turned to the mystified stableman. "Yank the hull off that critter and put him back to the haybox. Mr. Lane ain't goin' ridin'—not yet."

"What in hell do you mean?" asked Lane angrily.

"Well," Shif'less smiled—"Mr. Jones told me to kind of keep an eye on you, Lane. And you told Cleve Sears to arrest me, didn't you? You don't need to lie about it."

"You poor fool!" panted Lane. "Do you think you can keep me from doing what I please?"

"I don't know, Miles. Supposin' you just try to make a break."

Lane realized that Shif'less Hill was dangerous, in spite of his lazy grin, and the lawyer knew he could never get a gun from his coat pocket as quickly as Shif'less could draw from holster.

"All right, put the horse up," he said hoarsely to the stableman. "I'll be back for him soon."

Lane walked out, with Shif'less behind him. There was no sign of the sheriff, but a man was running down the middle of the street—Idaho Breen!

"What's the matter with him?" shouted Lane, as Idaho stumbled into the Oreana Saloon.

He started running toward the saloon, followed by Shif'less, running awkwardly in his high-heeled boots.

Faith Keene and her little boy came down a side street and stopped to let the two running men pass. Shif'less stopped short. "What's the matter, Shif'less?" she asked anxiously.

He shook his head. "I don't know, Faith." It was the first time he had ever called her Faith. "There's somethin' wrong, somethin' about the Lazy A. I don't *sabe* it. But I want to tell you somethin', Faith. Jack Keene is dead. He's been dead quite a while."

"Jack dead, Shif'less?"

"Yeah. I found out about it last night. You better take the boy over to the store. I don't know what's goin' on, but you better be in a safe place. Here comes the Star X outfit—and the Lazy A boys are already here!"

Faith hurried the little boy across the street, while Shif'less barged into the Oreana, where an excited crowd of men was listening to Idaho Breen tell how his team had run away, thrown him out, and had gone over the edge of the grade with Mary Ault.

"She couldn't go over that edge and live," declared Pie Ide. "So what's the use of gettin' the doctor?"

"I ran all the way to town!" panted Idaho. "Couldn't do anythin' alone. She didn't like it out there, so she sold out to me today, and was leavin'!" He stopped to get his breath. "I didn't have enough money to buy it, because she wanted such a big price, but I've got—got a bill of sale. It's awful! I was bringin' her down so she could get a train back to San Francisco!"

"Well, you couldn't help it," said someone. "Gosh, that's an awful way to pass out!"

"Well, let's get out there!" snorted Pie Ide.

Lane joined the crowd, and Shif'less walked in, followed by Buck Wing, Heinie Moriarity, Klondike Evans and Joe Chevrier.

The sheriff backed against the bar, forgetting all about arresting Shif'less in his fear that the Lazy A and the Star X outfits might pick up the battle where they had left off last time they met.

"Don't start anythin', boys," the sheriff warned, picking out Buck Wing who was in the lead. "This is no time to start trouble. Miss Ault has just been killed in a runaway, and we're goin' out to get her!"

LANE stepped close to the sheriff. "Get Shif'less Hill," he said.

Shif'less heard, but made no move to get away. The sheriff scowled at Lane, but stepped over to Shif'less.

"Shif'less, I've got to arrest you for butcherin' Lazy A beef," he said slowly. "Miles Lane says he seen you doin' it, so there ain't nothin' I can do."

"Thasall right, Cleve."

"The rest of you jiggers get your horses," ordered the sheriff. "Somebody get a rig at the stable, and somebody else rustle up the doctor."

The crowd made a break for the door, fairly shoving Shif'less and the sheriff outside. Breen and Miles Lane were shoved out in the forefront of the crowd. Just across the street a small group had gathered around a women who sat on the edge of the board walk. Faith Keene

was on her knees beside the woman, talking to Dude Wheeler.

Coming across the street toward the Oreana Saloon was the man they knew as Jones of Oklahoma. His shirt was plastered with blood from the wound in his left shoulder, and he shambled as though his knees were jointless.

"What in thunder happened to you?" the sheriff shouted to him.

Cultus stopped, bracing his feet far apart, his half-shut eyes fixed upon Idaho Breen, who had whirled as though to try to force his way back through the crowd. "Breen, don't move!" Cultus' voice croaked like that of a raven.

The men behind Breen fought to get out of line.

"Don't move, Lane!" Cultus repeated.

"What is it?" puffed the sheriff. He had forgotten he had a prisoner. "What's wrong with you, Jones?"

"He's been shot!" cried a man.

"Plumb loco."

"Blood all over him! Look out for him, boys."

"Don't move, Breen!" It was a weak warning. "You bushwhacker! You killer, you thief! You tried to steal the Lazy A. Oh, I've got the goods on you! I saw Jack Keene killed. I know your game. And you tried to kill that girl to cover your steal—you and Lane!"

Idaho Breen's hand flashed to his holster, came back so swiftly that few saw him make his draw, but the bloody-faced cowboy, bracing his knees to stay on his feet, made only one move. His right hand, dangling loosely at his side, flipped up and forward, firing his gun almost as it left the holster.

Glass crashed in the store-front across the street, as Breen's bullet missed Cultus. Breen pitched forward, flinging his gun almost out to Cultus' feet.

For the moment everyone had forgotten Miles Lane. He darted toward the hitch-rack, taking a chance that no one would shoot for fear of killing a horse. He had a gun in his hand. Then Cultus was running lumberingly toward the hitch-rack, cutting across in an angle to head off Lane.

Swiftly Lane untied a wicked-looking gray horse, which bore the Star X brand. The horse reared madly as Lane caught a foot in the stirrup, and he was forced to drop his gun in order to mount.

Again the horse reared, and as Cultus ran toward it Lane's right knee was atop the saddle as he fought to keep his balance. He managed to get in the saddle, but before he could swing the horse around Cultus had flung one arm around the frightened animal's head, swinging sideward with his whole weight.

With a scream of rage and fright the Star X gray seemed fairly to pinwheel on one leg, and crashed down, flinging Lane under the feet of other rearing broncos doing their best to break away.

Quickly the crowd rushed in, cut the horses loose and got Lane, while some of them lifted Cultus out of the dirt.

"By cracky, that's bull-doggin' 'em!" snorted Pie Ide, propping Cultus' head against his knee. "How are you, Jones?"

The sheriff shoved his way to Cultus. "Breen's dead," he said. "The doctor'll see to Lane. And say—that Ault girl ain't dead! She's over there across the street. What's this all about, Jones?"

Cultus looked up. "Is Lane bad hurt?"

"He sure is! Kicked and tromped plenty."

"Help me up, will yuh?"

THEY helped Cultus to his feet, and Buck Wing and Pie Ide assisted him over to where Lane lay, with the doctor looking him over. Lane was conscious, but badly hurt. He scowled at Cultus and groaned.

Cultus looked up to see Mary Smith, Faith Keene, Dude Wheeler and Shiftless Hill approaching. Mary was pale and weak, but except for shock and a few minor bruises she was all right.

The doctor shook his head and got to his feet.

"That means I'm all through, eh?" whispered Lane. "Tell me, Doc."

"I'm sorry Lane."

"Breen?" Lane asked.

"He's gone," said the sheriff. Lane tried to smile, but couldn't.

"Did Jack Keene shoot Jud Ault?" asked Cultus.

Lane shifted his eyes to Faith who was looking down at him, her eyes wide with amazement and fright.

"Breen shot him," he said wearily. He turned his head and looked at Cultus. "You know he did, Jones. He's gone, so it won't hurt him any."

Then Cultus knew that Keene *had* shot Ault, but that Lane was trying to save a heartache for Faith.

"I know he did," said Cultus. "Let's clear it all up this time, Lane. Was Shif'less Hill guilty of what you said?"

Lane shook his head. "No, you can drop it, Sheriff. Shif'less is all right. And the Lazy A will was a lie. Breen and I made one to suit us and Jud thought he was signing one he'd dictated. Faith Keene owns the Lazy A. There is no Mary Ault. Breen and I would have got the ranch if it hadn't been for Jones. Why don't you light the lamps? It's getting dark so early. Idaho, what about—that—girl? Idaho, we've —lost—"

Cultus was swaying in his tracks when Shif'less caught him. Mary ran to him, grasping his hands. He tried to smile at her, but it was only a grimace. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to see Dude Wheeler.

"Good boy, Jones," whispered Dude. "You sure cleaned up the crooks. We'll get you to the doctor."

"I'm all right," whispered Cultus. "Look out for Mary."

"I hope to, Jones. All my life."

Cultus looked at Mary. Everything was hazy, and her face seemed to stand out as it had that night in the fog in San Francisco. She was smiling.

"Yes," she said. "I am going to marry Dude Wheeler. Jones of Oklahoma, you have almost killed yourself bringing me happiness."

"I—I think it was worth it, Mary Elizabeth," he said.

They seemed to fade out, then he was talking to Shif'less and Faith Keene in a bedroom that must be in Faith's house.

"I've told her the whole story, Jones," said Shif'less. "She had to know that for over a year I've been stealin' Lazy A cattle, sellin' 'em to a butcher in Welcome Creek and givin' her the money that Jack Keene was supposed to be sendin' her. But she won't prosecute me, because she owns the Lazy A now."

"*We* do, Shif'less," corrected Faith. "Or soon will."

Cultus laughed softly. "I'm glad. I'm sorry for Breen and Lane, but there's enough happiness to more than balance it. Is that doctor ever goin' to quit foolin' around and do somethin' for my shoulder? I'm gettin' weak."

"You're all fixed up," said Faith. "This is the first time you've been rational since you were shot, three days ago. You'll be as good as new in a few days. You'll have to be, because you'll be best man at a double wedding."

Cultus stared up at the ceiling and around the room. Shif'less said:

"And the Star X and the Lazy A rannies are settin' outside, waitin' for the doctor to tell 'em you'll get well."

"Settin' together?" queried Cultus.

"Have been for three days. They're workin' in relays, like me and Faith and Dude and Mary."

"Mary has told us everything," said Faith softly. "Personally, I think she should have married you."

Cultus shook his head slowly, averting his eyes. "No-o-o, it's better this way. You see," he turned and smiled bravely, "I'm kind of a nervous disposition, and I'd never be contented with a wife that—that was always ridin' runaways."

Shif'less laughed heartily, and wondered why that didn't sound funny to Faith—who understood.

But the feud between the Lazy A and the Star X was over, so Cultus smiled and went to sleep. He would need more strength to be best man at a wedding than he would to be best man in a gunfight.

Finally the stage loomed into view

Quiet Afternoon in Cactus Creek

By SAM BRANT

IT was a quiet afternoon in the little cowtown called Cactus Creek. A number of the local citizens were gathered in Hank Harper's saloon for two reasons—first because they were mildly thirsty, and second because it was about the only place in town to go.

"What this town needs is a barber shop quartet," Johnny Watson announced during a sudden lull in the dull festivities. "Yes, sir, that would be just the thing."

Johnny Watson was a young waddy who was so big and husky that he looked fat. He worked for the Bar S outfit over south of town.

"How could we have a barber shop quartet when we haven't even got a barber shop in town?" Willie Simple demanded. He was a big fat man, and his saggy black beard was a good example of what the undressed face will wear. "You get the craziest ideas, Johnny."

"Nothing loco about that," Johnny said. "You don't have to have a barber shop to have a barber shop quartet." He looked at Willie. "Not that you couldn't use one."

"What would I do with a quartet?" Willie asked. He wasn't very bright even when he worked real hard at it. "I've got enough trouble taking care of myself."

"I meant a barber shop," Johnny said.

"Don't you go casting reflections on my beard," Willie said indignantly. "Even when your face is shaved clean like it is now I'm a heap prettier than you are. I won't stand here and be insulted."

"Then move a little," Johnny said.

For a moment the two big men glared at each other and it looked like it would be a battle of pachyderms. Then the other patrons breathed a sigh of disappointment as they remembered that

Who Stole Johnny Watson's Yellow, Black-Striped Slicker?

Johnny and Willie always talked a good fight but failed to engage in actual physical combat.

"If I wasn't feeling a mite peaked this evening I'd knock you into the middle of next week," Willie said. "And wait until you bounce back."

"Never mind that," said Johnny. "I'm not in a fighting mood. I crave to lift my voice in song. If we form a quartet, I aim to sing bass."

JOHNNY WATSON lowered his voice in his own version of "Asleep in the Deep." His voice sounded like the reckless blending of the wail of a buzz-saw and the moaning of a very sick bull. It wasn't a happy combination for those who heard it.

Behind the bar, round-faced, bald-headed Hank Harper looked like a mournful Easter egg as his face turned purple. The strange sounds that issued from Johnny's mouth had made the saloon owner strangle on a glass of water he was drinking.

"Where is it?" came a shout from outside the saloon. "I'll get it!"

Sheriff Seth Lang burst through the swinging doors, wildly waving his gun. He was over six feet tall and weighed a hundred and thirty pounds. When he cast a shadow it was usually mistaken for that of any other telegraph pole. He halted and glared at Johnny who was still singing.

"What's the matter with you all?" the sheriff demanded. "If Johnny Watson is that sick why doesn't someone get a doctor?"

"He isn't sick," Willie Simple said resignedly. "He's singing."

"He's what?" Lang asked in amazement.

"Singing," Willie repeated. "He sings bass."

"He sure does," said the sheriff, thrusting his gun back into the holster. "I never heard baser singing in my life."

Johnny stopped singing and looked offended. "A good voice just isn't appreciated around here," he said. "Or maybe it is professional jealousy. I've heard some of you claim you were good singers."

A lean, dark haired man dressed in worn and dust-covered range clothes stood at the far end of the bar. He was Matt Crawford, who owned a little ranch six miles north of Cactus Creek.

"Too bad that a man can't come to town and have a few drinks in peace without you making all that noise, Watson," Crawford said in a nasty tone. "You've got the worst voice I ever heard. You can't even sing a note."

Johnny Watson just looked at him. He never had liked Matt Crawford. The rancher never had been friendly with anyone, and the few times they had met Crawford had shown a particular dislike for the big young waddy from the Bar S outfit.

"Could be you're right, Crawford," Johnny said. "Maybe my singing is like your ranching—neither one of us are very good at it."

The other men in the bar looked at each other, and waited tensely. What Johnny had just said was hitting close to home so far as Matt Crawford was concerned. He was a shiftless sort of individual and his Rafter C was rundown and badly cared for in all ways.

"I always heard you talked a good fight, Watson," Crawford said. "But that's all there is to it."

"Depends on who I'm talking to a lot," Johnny said.

He stood motionless watching Crawford put his empty glass down on the bar and walk toward him. The sheriff, the saloon owner and Willie Simple and the four other men in the place watched and waited.

"I think you're yellow," Crawford said.

He paused close to Johnny and deliberately slapped the big waddy on the right cheek. Before he could draw his hand back a hard fist thudded against his chin and the blow had plenty of Johnny Watson's weight behind it. Crawford went over backward, hit the

noor hard and just sprawled there unconscious.

"Oh, my," said Willie Simple looking at Johnny in amazement. "I'm sure glad you just talk a good fight with me." The big, bearded man shook his head. "Why a feller could get hurt fooling around you."

"Uh-huh," said the sheriff drily. "Might even be killed."

From out on the single street of the town there came the thudding of hoofs, the rumble of wheels and voices and the cracking of a whip.

"That's the southbound Overland coming in," Willie Simple said, heading for the swinging doors. "Let's go see if the stage brought any interesting passengers or exciting news."

"Yeah, let's," said Johnny as he followed Willie.

THE sheriff and the rest of the patrons of the Jolly Hours Saloon trailed along after them, leaving Matt Crawford lying unconscious on the floor. In a few moments they all were gone. Behind the bar Hank Harper sighed.

"That's the way with folks around here," he muttered. "Make a mess in my place and then leave me to clean it up."

The bald-headed saloon owner picked up a full glass of water and flung the contents at Crawford. He missed the unconscious man's face by at least a foot. Harper filled the glass and tried again. This time his aim was much better. Crawford sputtered and sat up as the water caught him squarely in the face.

"Looks like rain," he muttered dazedly.

"It's rain water," Harper said. "I've got barrels of it."

"Where is he?" Crawford demanded angrily as he fully recovered his senses and scrambled to his feet. "I'm going to kill that Johnny Watson!"

"Go ahead, I'm not stopping you," Harper said languidly. "But there's one thing maybe I better tell you. Just for your own good, mind you, and not that I give a hoot one way or the other."

"Tell me what?" Crawford asked impatiently.

"That Johnny Watson is even faster with a gun than he is with his fists." Harper began gathering up the empty glasses on the bar. Crawford glared at him and then headed for the door. "It has been nice knowing you—maybe!"

Down the street Johnny Watson and the other men were standing in front of the stage station listening to the stage driver and the express guard as they talked.

"That's the way I heard it," Ike Moore, the old stage driver said. "The southbound stage was held up by a lone bandit about five miles south of here yesterday afternoon. The robber got the express box containing a shipment of cash bound for the bank at Marshville."

"Happened yesterday afternoon and I'm just hearing about it now," said Sheriff Seth Lang. "Why doesn't someone tell me these things?"

"I just finished telling you," the stage driver said. He was a good man when it came to handling a double team, but he wasn't overly bright. "The bank at Marshville has been right upset about not receiving that ten thousand dollars in cash, but they can stop worrying soon."

"Why?" asked the sheriff. "They catch the robber?"

"Not as I know of yet," said Moore. "But we're carrying another ten thousand in cash for the Marshville Bank and no lone bandit will get that money away from us." He glanced at the guard. "Will they, Jud?"

"No," said Jud Dale. The express guard was a man of few words and Johnny suspected that might be because Jud didn't know any more. "They won't."

As he stood a little bit away from the others Johnny discovered that Matt Crawford had come up and was standing beside him. The owner of the Rafter C seemed much more interested in what the stage driver was saying than he was

in Johnny Watson. Which in Johnny's estimation just wasn't natural.

"That's fine—that's just dandy," Sheriff Lang said disgustedly, glaring at Moore. "You're just asking for the stage to be held up like that one was yesterday, Ike. When they were giving out brains, they sure must have served you with a teaspoon!"

"Aw, you're just saying that because it is so, Sheriff," Willie Simple said as he turned away. "I've got to be getting home—got me a lot of work to do at my place in the morning."

"You all right, Willie?" Johnny looked at the big bearded man anxiously. "When it comes over you sudden-like the way it seems to have done, you've got to be careful."

"What comes over who when and which?" Willie Simple asked confusedly.

"This sudden hankering to do a day's work," Johnny said with a grin. "Keep away from me—it might be catching."

WILLIE uttered the snort of a water buffalo and hurried away. He got his big bay horse and rode out of town. He lived alone in a little cabin southwest of town and usually believed that each setting sun should find him with no work done.

Johnny noticed that Matt Crawford had also wandered away, and a few minutes later the owner of the Rafter C rode out of town.

"And without a harsh word or a nasty look after the way I socked him in the jaw," Johnny muttered as he watched Crawford depart. "Just don't seem natural."

The sheriff was still expressing his opinion of the stage driver. Ike Moore had a few caustic comments on lawmen who bore a striking resemblance to an animated two by four and a heated time was had by all. Jud Dale was saying nothing at even greater length than usual.

Johnny Watson decided the sheriff

[*Turn page*]

SEE the World in Pictures

in America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!

Packed with Fascinating Photos and Features

•

Now on Sale—Only 15c Per Copy

If You Hurry, You Can Still Get Your Copies of these Big 1951 Anthologies of the Best in Western Reading—

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

and

ROMANTIC WESTERN ANNUAL

•

Now On Sale—Each 25c At All Stands!

Hiya, Folks! Here's the Best in Western Reading!

THRILLING PUBLICATIONS feature Western yarns written by America's top hand writers—novels, novelets and stories of the range packed with plenty of rip-roaring action that keeps you riding tight in the saddle!

Here are tales of the colorful, roistering Frontier—the excitement and glamour of the rodeo arena—the heartbeats of Western romance! Whatever your taste in Western reading—there's A THRILLING PUBLICATION built to your order!

THRILLING WESTERN
GIANT WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN
POPULAR WESTERN
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
RIO KID WESTERN
RANCH ROMANCES
TEXAS RANGERS
THRILLING RANCH STORIES
TRIPLE WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN
WEST
FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

•

When You Visit Your Favorite Newsstand, Look for the Brand

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ON THE COVERS OF THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

could handle the situation and drifted away. It had dawned on the big cowboy that it was time he started heading back to the Bar S if he expected to reach the ranch by dark. It was now late afternoon.

It had looked like rain when Johnny had saddled up to ride into town that morning. His boss, old man Summers, had given Johnny a check that the ranch owner had received for a sale of some cattle. Summers had told Johnny to deposit the check in the Cactus Creek bank, and that he might take his time about getting back to the ranch.

Johnny deposited the check and then hung around town most of the day. Now as he went to get his paint pony from the hitching-rail in front of Jolly Hours Saloon Johnny discovered that the slicker he had tied to his saddle was missing.

"Some low down thief must have stolen my slicker," Johnny said disgustedly. "Wonder he even left me my horse."

He was still thinking about that slicker when he tightened up the saddle cinch, unfastened the reins from the rail and swung into leather. In Johnny's estimation that slicker had been a thing of beauty and a joy forever. It was yellow with black stripes running down it. Those stripes had been Johnny's own idea—he had painted them on the rubber with waterproof paint.

"Sure won't be hard to identify that slicker if I ever find it again," Johnny said as he rode on out of town. "Come to think of it, why would anyone want to steal anything most folks would know belonged to me?"

Johnny had a sudden hunch. He had intended heading straight south across the rangeland to the Bar S as that was the quickest way to get to the ranch, but now he circled around a little and reached a spot where he could see the stage road as it wandered on southward away from the town.

He had departed before fresh horses had been hitched to the stage and the Overland had continued on its way, but he was sure it would be along soon. He

waited and finally the stage loomed into view with Ike Moore handling the reins and Jud Dale sitting beside the driver.

As the Overland drew closer a masked man on a big horse rode out from behind some big boulders. The bandit was wearing a yellow slicker with black stripes. He fired a shot over the heads of the two men on the driver's seat. Dale thrust his arms high above his head and Moore brought the four horse team to a stop.

"Thought so!" said Johnny as he stood up in his stirrups to take a good look. "Figured to frame me."

Johnny dropped back into the saddle and headed his horse toward the stage at a gallop. He was so mad at the dirty trick the stage robber was trying to play on him that he didn't care if the lone bandit heard him coming.

The paint's hoofs made plenty of noise as Johnny rode over a stretch of hard ground. The masked man whirled his bay horse around and fired a wild shot in the big cowboy's direction. Johnny had his Colt in his right hand. He fired and his bullet hit the masked man in the right arm. The bandit dropped his gun.

ABOUT then it dawned on Jud Dale that his job was to protect the stage. He grabbed up his shotgun and covered the masked man as Johnny rode up.

"We got him!" Dale shouted.

"You mean Johnny Watson did," said Sheriff Lang as he stuck his head out through a window of the coach. "And I'm betting the lone bandit is Matt Crawford."

"What odds you giving, Sheriff?" said Johnny as he rode close to the bandit, who wasn't making any attempt to get away. "Tell me and I'll take the bet."

"Ten dollars at two to one," said the sheriff. "Pull that mask off him, Johnny."

Johnny reached out and pulled the bandanna mask off the stage robber. It was the sullen, bearded face of Willie

[*Turn page*]

CHECK ASTHMA SYMPTOMS ANYTIME!

Any time — anywhere! Convenient ASTHMADOR — in powder, cigarette or pipe mixture form — is always ready and easy to use. ASTHMADOR'S soothing, aromatic fumes bring welcome relief from the distressing symptoms of bronchial asthma. Economical, too. At any drug store in U. S. and Canada.

DR. R. SCHIFFMANN'S
ASTHMADOR

Advertising BOOK MATCHES
SPOT CASH PROFITS . . . REPEATS
World's Largest Direct-Selling Book Match Manufacturer offers you big opportunity in profitable year 'round business. Make money with MATCHCORP 20, 30, 40 and 240-light book matches. Low prices for high quality. Repeats. Full or part time; men, women. NOTHING TO BUY, giant 250-page catalog and other catalogs furnished plus selling information.
Get started right away—WRITE TODAY!
MATCH CORPORATION OF AMERICA
3433-43 W. 48th Pl. Dept. TG-81 CHICAGO 32, ILL.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home
MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Many Swedish Massage graduates make big money! Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. Prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 163K 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. Sent on Trial! Write NOW for free Booklet and Proof of Results. All correspondence confidential.
Brooks Company, 183-K State St., Marshall, Mich.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.
In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE
in Every Issue of
EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY
Packed with Stellar Features and Forecasts for Everybody
★ NOW ON SALE-25c *At All Stands*

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Don't wait! Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. If you can quit for 7 days, you've won half the battle. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.
DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

TOOTHACHE?

Quick relief with Dent's. Use Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops for cavity toothaches. Use Dent's Dental Poultice for pain or soreness in gums or teeth. At all drug stores.

"Since 1886"

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS DENTAL POULTICE

RUPTURE

RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. *You* risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.

WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-8 Hagerstown, Md.

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking."
NATIONAL BAKING SCHOOL, 835 Diversey Parkway, Dept. 180C, Chicago 14, Ill.

FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY!

✓

CHECK YOUR WITS
with
CHECK YOUR WITS
By JULES LEOPOLD

A Fascinating Book of Puzzles, Problems, Games and Quizzes

Now in a POPULAR LIBRARY Edition

25c AT ALL STANDS

Simple that was revealed. The sheriff looked dumbfounded.

"Figured it had to be Willie after I discovered that my slicker was missing," Johnny said. "And when I got a good look at the holdup man I was plumb sure of it. First place Willie is one of the few men around here as big as I am and the slicker fits him right good. Much better than it would fit Crawford. Besides only Willie is dumb enough to try to frame me by wearing my slicker and then ride that big bay horse everybody knows belongs to him."

"You're right, Johnny," said the sheriff. "I would have noticed that when I got around to it. I'm betting it was Willie Simple who held up the other stage yesterday."

"Of course it was," said Johnny. "Only he would be fool enough to try and do the same thing twice in a row."

Johnny found that he felt very happy about the whole thing so he began to sing. The strange noise was just too much for the already nervous stage horses—they went away from there in a hurry, dragging the coach with them. Moore couldn't stop them no matter how hard he tugged on the reins.

"Shucks, something must have frightened those horses," said Johnny as he stopped singing. He still kept Willie covered with his gun. "And now I've got to stay here and guard you until the stage gets back with the sheriff." He grinned. "You know, Willie, you do better at talking a good fight than you do acting out a good holdup!"

"All right," said Willie Simple. "Anything you say, but just don't sing anymore. I couldn't stand that."

Puzzle Entertainment on Every Page of

VARIETY CROSSWORD PUZZLES

NOW ON SALE—25c AT ALL STANDS!